



A Study
on the Interactive Relationship between the Environmental
NGOs and the Media in Sweden

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Abstract

In this paper the interactive relationship between environmental NGOs and the media in Sweden is investigated. The paper is based on an empirical study from the information which has been collected from seven interviews with the environmental communicators, journalists and a PR consultant about how these environmental NGOs and journalists communicate with each other. With the theories of symbolic interactionism and environmental communication, the author aims to profoundly describe and analyze how the environmental NGOs interact with the media in Sweden. After interview discussion and interpretation, this paper shows that the relationship between these environmental NGOs and the media is cooperative and strategic, therefore most of NGOs have their own communication strategies, whereas some of which being used are not acknowledged by the environmental communicators. The paper also illustrates that the goal for NGOs in their communication with the media is to get a large number of media coverage so as to gain social influence on policy making or to arouse public awareness, etc. Though the communication strategies are helpful, it is inevitable that the environmental communicators may meet some problems when communicating with the journalists because of different perspectives.

Key Words: interview, environmental communication, strategies, interaction, perspective.

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1. Background

Environmental NGOs are the most active actors nowadays in the environmental arena. They advocate sustainable development, protest for the environment and actively engage in all kinds of environmental activities. As non-governmental organizations, most environmental NGOs are known to have a mission to change people's unsustainable attitudes and behaviors. In order to achieve the goal, environmental NGOs need to draw attention from the public, business organizations, or even politicians. Then one way for environmental NGOs to approach the public is to work together with the media, as we live in a society where mass media is dominating in our lives.

Generally speaking, the media and NGOs are both concerned about the public and social affairs, with strong social responsibilities. This is the basis of the value of their interaction. However, the media should be independent and objective. The media are supposed to report what is happening in the society in an objective position. The media are not affiliated to any organizations. Accordingly NGOs and the media have their different agendas and roles. So if environmental NGOs want to use the media as a means to help themselves accomplish their missions and get a certain influence in the society, they may have to communicate with media in a right way.

Working in NGOs can be attractive to many prospective environmental communicators. Nevertheless, it is inevitable to work with the media if we work in NGOs as environmental communicators. So it is worthwhile to understand the interactive relationship between environmental NGOs and the media and how they communicate with each other and interpret each other in advance. Hence, this paper will focus on this topic and further discuss the interaction between the environmental NGOs and the media in the context of Sweden, which will provide prospective environmental communicators who are interested in working with the media in Sweden with an in-depth introduction.

2. Aim and Research Questions

In this paper the interactive relationship between different environmental NGOs and journalists in Sweden will be investigated so as to show the environmental communicators who want to work in this field a clear picture about how this communication is working. The paper will be drawn on the theories of symbolic interactionism and environmental communication in order to close study how different environmental communicators from NGOs and different journalists answer when being asked about the interaction between them, in an attempt to describe and analyze how those NGOs and the media perceive their relationship and how the NGOs communicate with the media. In order to achieve this aim, I will investigate the following research questions and try to answer them in this paper:

Are the media important for environmental NGOs on their way to work for the environment?

How do different environmental NGOs and the media (mainly journalists) perceive each other?

What kind of interactive relationship between NGOs and the media do they perceive?

How do different environmental NGOs communicate with the media? What kind of strategies are they using?

What are the goals for these environmental NGOs in their communication with the media?

What criteria do these environmental NGOs have when evaluate their success in their communication with the media?

What difficulties or conflicts do these environmental NGOs and the media have in their communication with each other?

3. Methodology

For this research, seven interviews were conducted: one phone interview with Director of Operations from The Natural Step, and face-to-face interviews with Communication Officer from Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation, Press officer from Greenpeace, Press officer from Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SNF), a consultant from Westander PR company, a news reporter from a Swedish magazine who deals with all kinds of news and an senior environmental reporter from one of the biggest Swedish newspaper. These interviewees have been chosen because different perspectives would like to be heard in order to draw a more objective conclusion, among which the PR consultant was selected for getting a comparatively neutral perspective. In all these interviews, the semi-structured interview methodology was mainly used, together with the opened-ended techniques. In this way, all the interviewees were guided with some prepared questions so that the indispensable information would not be missed, but also it provided freedom for the interviewees to interpret questions and let their thoughts flow. Besides, in the interviews the communicator interviewees and journalists had two kinds of questions, and the PR consultant had another sets of questions.

After conducting interviews and transcribing what have been said, the qualitative method is being used to analyze the information which has been collected from the interviews in this research. The interpretation of the data is being made by the personal perceptions, knowledge and the relevant communication theories.

4. Theories

In this paper, some theories will be drawn on to analyze the interaction between the environmental NGOs and the journalists. In this section, the theories of symbolic interactionism and environmental communication will be generally introduced first.

4.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a social psychological theory to investigate human interaction, which “regards the human being as active in the environment; an organism that interacts with others and with self; a dynamic being; a being that defines immediate situations according to perspectives developed and altered in ongoing social interactions”(Charon 2007, p.42). Symbolic interaction is “the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or

‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions”(Blumer 1998, p.79). It is a perspective which focuses on social interaction as a process that “is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions” (Blumer 1998, p.79). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, human beings are social actors whose actions are led by social interaction; we are thinking beings who not only interact with others but also interact with our selves by thinking; we define the situation through social interaction and thinking; our action is caused by what is happening in the present; and we are active beings in the environment (Charon 2007, p.29-30).

According to symbolic interactionism, there may be a reality existing, however, human beings define it via our perspectives. How we act depending on how we define and interpret reality. We define a situation by setting up goals, applying a perspective, identifying the relevant social objects including other people or ideas, etc., taking the role of the other, defining our self in the situation, defining the future and imaging the effect of our acts and applying the knowledge and memories from the past (Charon 2007, p.129). Perspective here is an important concept and it is an approach and angle for us to see reality. It is thus a bias. Humans define the situation and interact with others and our self by means of different perspectives. Hence, all human beings perceive reality from certain perspectives. Perspective is perceived as conceptual framework from the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Charon 2007). It can be influenced by many factors such as ages, gender or identity. The perspective can decide what we see and what we do (Charon 2007, p.9).

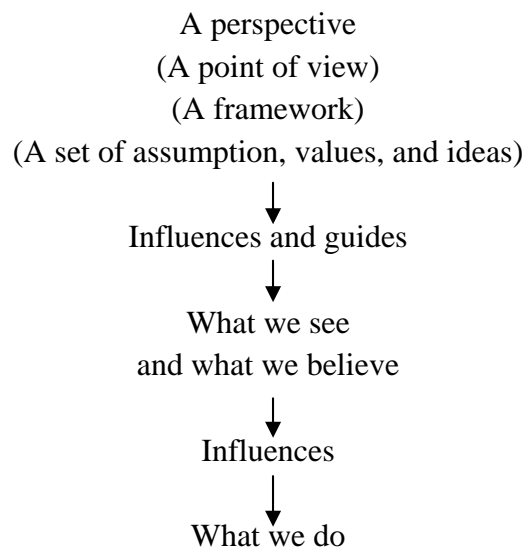


Figure1. Perspective decides what we do

In this study, the communicators and the journalists have different perspectives and roles. These different perspectives will influence their definitions of the situation, their perception of each other and their acts on the situation. All of these will be analyzed later in the empirical discussion and interpretation section.

4.2 Environmental Communication

The communication between NGOs and the media happens in the environmental arena. So this interaction is environmental communication, especially for NGOs. NGOs are trying to “draw upon language and other symbols to construct a framework for understanding and

valuing and to bring the wider world to others' attention" through the media, particularly about the environment (Cox 2006, p.15). Therefore this environmental communication is a symbolic interaction which creates "meaning and actively structure our conscious orientation" to the environment with symbols, such as pictures, films, reports, or articles (Cox 2006, p.14). Environmental communication is a socially interactive process that people communicate with each other about environmental issues and the natural resources with their knowledge. It is "the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world; the symbolic medium that we use in constructing environmental problems and in negotiating society's different responses to them" (Cox 2006, p.30). Through communication, human beings are not only achieving education and persuasion in order to reach an environmental-friendly goal; it also helps us shape our perception and understanding of the environment and nature. Environmental communication is pragmatic which "educates, alerts, persuades, mobilizes, and helps us to solve environmental problems" (Cox 2006, p.12). It is also constitutive which "helps to constitute, or compose, representations of nature and environmental problems themselves as subjects for our understanding" (Cox 2006, p.12). By communication, NGOs want to educate or persuade the public and to shape the understandings of their target groups via the media on certain environmental problems that they are putting forward. However, in order to achieve this objective, NGOs have to find a way to convince the media publishing their messages first and to invite the journalists to perceive the environment issues they are putting forward in an expected way.

In the field of environmental communication, there are two popular communication models. One is the classical model (Figure 1) (Nitsch 2000). In this model, the communication is a systematic process that sender delivers a message through a selected channel or medium to receiver and then monitors the communication effect through the feedback in order to make sure whether or not the communication is successful.

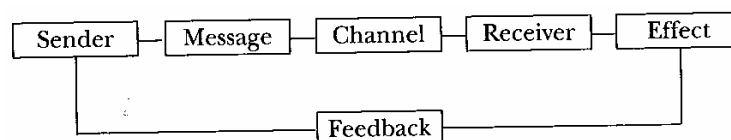


Figure 2. The classical communication model

The second communication model is the relevance model (Figure 2). It shows that there is "an encounter and an exchange between sender and information-seeking target group" (Nitsch 2000, p.206).

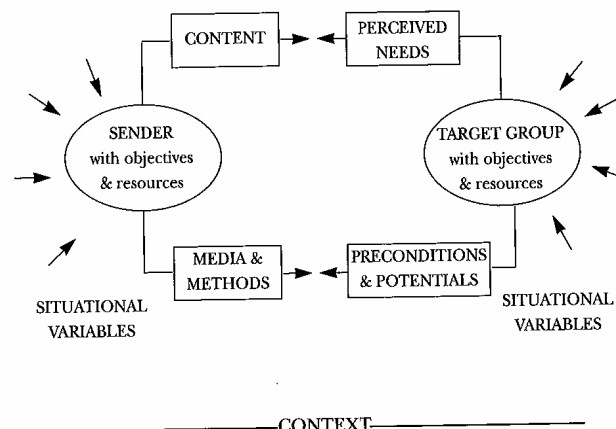


Figure3. The relevance communication model

In the relevance model, target group is the receiver of information with objectives and resources. When sender is sending the message, what he or she has to consider is that the content of the message should be relevant to the perceived needs of the target group and sender should also consider the way of presenting information to be relevant to the target group's precondition and potentials for receiving (Nitsch 2000). Receiver is involved in the process of formulating the message. Before the message delivery, sender needs to think about what target group really need and how target group will interpret the message and how the target group will react on it in order to achieve effective communication; because target group may have different cultural, social, economic, political preconditions which would influence the effect of this communication. According to this communication model, there are seven stages for the planning of environmental communication including: target group analysis, identification of objectives and content, choice of media and methods, implementation, analysis of results, evaluation and dealing with the institutional framework (Nitsch 2000).

In both environmental communication models, the media are regarded as the means that sender use to deliver the message to receiver. In this study, the role of the media in environmental communication will be profoundly discussed and we will analyze the communication between the NGOs and the media in order to investigate which model is applicable in this kind of environmental communication

5. Empirical Discussions and Interpretations

For this study, totally seven interviews were conducted. Among those interviewees, there were four NGO communicators, two journalists, and one PR consultant who helped NGOs deal with the communication with the media. After these interviews, it turns out that most interviewees were quite satisfied with the current relationship between environmental NGOs and the media. They all said they thought they were working very well. These communicators also believed that the media were very important channels for them to deliver messages and reach a broader audience, even though some NGOs did not have much connection with the media because they might a different goal or different means to deliver message and reach the target group which would not be further investigated in this paper. Since the relationship between these environmental NGOs and the media is quite satisfactory, how do they interact with each other and do they have any problems in their communication? These questions would be discussed in this section on the basis of the information from these seven interviews.

5.1 Backgrounds and Experiences

Before going into the communication between NGOs and the media, let us understand what these environmental communicators usually do in their work with the media first. From what I understand the interviewees, the communicators basically have to work on the two functions of environmental communication. First of all, when there is a project, communicators have to choose a way to reach their target groups. If the media are needed, they have to use the pragmatic function of environmental communication to decide a way or a form of communication with the media, like designing a press conference or writing a press

release. Next, the communicators need to figure out what kind of message they want to deliver to the media, how to formulate their message in a more attractive way and when to do it, that is, they need to use the constitutive function of environmental communication to work on the words or pictures so as to give a better understanding to the target groups and attract the media to publish the message.

In the interviews with the NGO communicators, most of the interviewees are the communication officers or press officers who are in charge of the communication with the media in their organizations. After the interviews, something in common among those interviewees has been found out: most of these communicators have educational background or work experience in journalism. Although this could be coincident, theoretically this is something which should not be ignored.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, human beings experience a situation definition process in the interaction as presented above: interpreting the situation; setting up the goals; building up identities in order to apply a perspective; taking the role of the other; defining self and other social objects and applying knowledge. In order to conduct a good communication, a good definition of the situation and a better understanding of the other's perspective are indispensable. The definition of the situation can help us understand the situation, decide what kind of action we can take and how to act upon the environment and interact with others. In the definition of the situation, taking the role of the other is for an understanding of the other's perspective. It is an active process called "mind action" which "involves doing, creating, active building on the actor's part; something is created by the one who imagines; a discussion is involved, a discussion with oneself" (Charon 2007, p.104). This mind action means we use the other's symbolic framework to see reality when we communicate, in short, we imagine the other's perspective when we communicate in order to act. We take the perspective of the one that we are communicating with, and imagine his or her intention, feelings, and possible action and reaction so that we can act on him or her appropriately. This process is fairly essential in human interaction and is always done unconsciously. The role that we take in this interaction base on our reference group "whose perspective we learn" from our experience or past and "apply to situations we encounter, and which guides what we end up doing in that situation" (Charon 2007, p.109). We take the role of the other with our pre-understanding and knowledge on our reference group.

Theoretically, the environmental communication between NGOs and the media is symbolic interaction. People who engage in this communication should also go through the mind action when they interact. The communicators from NGOs, as social beings, need to take the role of the media when they communicate and they need to know the standpoint of journalists so as to conduct an effective communication. As one of my interviewees says, it is important for the organization to have someone who knows the Swedish media landscape. Therefore the reason why these communicators from these NGOs have the educational background or work experience in journalism can be interpreted that these communicators can have a better reference group to refer to when they communicate with journalists. This reference group is the people whom they have met or worked with before or even can be themselves when they were journalists. Although these communicators may not have professional backgrounds in natural science, they have a better understanding on how the

media work and what perspective journalists have. These environmental communicators could use their experience and their pre-understanding to understand journalists' symbolic framework. For instance, in the interviews with these environmental communicators, they mention some words like "news-like", "media's agenda" without further explanation. The meaning of these symbols may be unclear enough for the people who do not have knowledge about journalism. This kind of journalists' discourse is taken for granted by these communicators who understand the perspective of journalists. Another example is that the communicator from Greenpeace. He mentions that he always helps journalists to highlight some problematic environmental issues and sometimes provides the fact for journalists to publish it since he thinks that the media's job is to criticize what is happening in the society. This can be interpreted that he does not only have the perspective as an environmentalist who knows that the environmental problems are not good, but also holds the journalistic view and he has the capability to find out what can be news and what is good for publishing. These examples further illustrate that these communicators can take the role of the journalists and they are more capable of imagining the intentions, actions and reactions of journalists in the communication.

Therefore the background and experience of the communicators can help them define the situation. Human action "is determined not by what went before but by the definition of the situation in the present" (Charon 2007, p.131). This definition of the present situation is influenced by what we have experienced in the past. "The past is used to make sense out of the present." (Charon 2007, p.131) It is our past that plays an essential role in our present action. When we meet a situation in the present, we recall what we know and have experienced, and then apply these memories to the present situation. Our experience does not cause what we do but it provides us with tools to understand the situation. What we do now result from our present choices and decisions, and our past can be used for us are social objects to make these choices and decisions in order to define the present and guide our action in the present (Charon 2007). From this point of view, those communicators from the environmental NGOs can use their experience and memories to make their decisions and design their communication strategies in the present.

However, there is a possibility that this kind of background may also cause some problems for their communication with the media. Theoretically, the perspective is a bias. These communicators who believe that they share the perspective of journalists may be biased by what they take for granted. But this possibility is not investigated in this study.

5.2 Different Perceptions

What kind of relationship do environmental NGOs and the media have? In order to have a sufficient analysis on different perceptions on the relationship between environmental NGOs and the media, let's first talk about in what way the media and the environmental NGOs communicate with each other.

Environmental issues are hot topics in the global nowadays. One environmental reporter whom was interviewed said that in their newspaper they reported environmental news quite often. She said they might even report environmental news everyday during a week. This frequency of news production may create a much broader space for the interaction between

the environmental NGOs and journalists in Sweden. The media is assumed to be useful for NGOs, because theoretically the media can help the public frame their interpretation of the world and since “the ‘central organizing themes... that connect different semantic elements of a news story (headlines, quotes, leads, visual representations, and narrative structure) into a coherent whole to suggest what is at issue’” help people understand the world (Cox 2006, p.178). People can get their understanding of reality with the help of media. The media play a role of a catalyst which can affect people’s thinking and “exert an individual and collective influence... through ‘agenda-setting’” (Anderson 1997, p.24) by telling people what to think about. Due to these traits, the media can be very helpful for NGOs on their way to achieve their goals of making changes in people’s thinking and actions on the environment.

According to the NGO communicators, the environmental NGOs work with the media in a cooperative way. From the perspective of NGOs, on the one hand, the media are a channel to reach the public. NGOs deliver their messages or stories via the media to the public so as to draw the public’s attention. By doing so, environmental NGOs aim to either increase the public’s awareness on certain environmental issues or rally support from the public in order to give the environmental decision makers or business organization pressure on certain environmental policies or environmental behaviors. On the other hand, the media can be a platform for environmental NGOs to propagandize themselves which was mentioned by the interviewee from Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation. The communicators implied that the media could help them expand their social influence and visibility. When the environmental NGOs contact the media and get a great media coverage, they can build up good reputations among the public or the decision makers. In this way, the media can indirectly help NGOs to realize NGOs’ objectives of fund-raising, public advocacy and policy impact because they have already given a good impression to the public or the decision makers through the media. This function of the media determines the communication goals of NGOs when they approach to the media, which will be further discussed later.

The interaction is two-way. It is not always the environmental NGOs initiating this interaction. For the media, the environmental NGOs are also very important to some extent. When the media need professional comments on certain environmental issues, environmental NGOs are the ones that the media cannot miss as they are more professional and influential. The news is supposed to be neutral. Two values of journalism are objectivity and balance, which is “commitment to which is made by news media to provide information that is accurate and without reporter bias and, where there is uncertainty or controversy, to balance news stories with statements from all sides of the issue”(Cox 2006, p.199). In order to achieve objectivity and balance, news media always balance stories by quoting from different perspectives. For example, the environmental reporter suggests, when the government has a proposition, the reporters need different opinions on this issue, and then they may ask for professional views on this proposition both from environmental NGOs and researchers.

From what have been discussed, it seems that these environmental NGOs have a systematical cooperation with the journalists. Then how do they perceive each other and their relations? From the perspective of these NGOs, the media in general are independent to any organizations in Sweden. Though the media and the NGOs have cooperation in working with the environment, they are independent entities. Most of the communicators express that the

media cannot be manipulated because the media have their own agenda. For instance, they have one common problem when they communicate with the media that they cannot always get their stories published in the same way they want. However, for some communicators, the media's agenda has not influenced their trust in the media. They believe this is the way in which the media should work. This trust is interpreted that the communicators know the media are objective and critical and they do not complain about any negative news about them coming out. But another communicator mentioned that due to the media's agenda, they have some strategies in not trusting media so much since the media can be nice to them but also can be negative to them. These different perceptions on the media can be interpreted that the communicators' different backgrounds and their different backgrounds influence their expectation when they communicate with the media. From the result of the interviews, the interviewees who do not think that the media's agenda would influence their trust in the media have the work experience as journalists. Therefore, it seems that they take the media's agenda for granted. As analyzed previously, people define the situation with the help of their past. The perspectives and beliefs they get from their past "are recalled and used as social objects to work through the present situation" (Charon 2007, p.131). Then these perspectives and values influence what they see and what they believe. These communicators were journalists years ago, then their perspectives are influenced by their past, hereby, they can easily accept the media's agenda. However, the interviewee who admits to have the strategy in not trusting the media too much has the educational background in media communication but not work experience. Then she may define the situation from another perspective. She might know how the media work but she might not share the perspective of journalists. She might get her perspective and her belief from what she has encountered, for example, she probably has encountered some situation which made her lose confidence in the media to some extent. This situation helps her build a different perception on the media.

Then how do the journalists think about environmental NGOs? Both journalists that have been interviewed believe that NGOs trust them since they are professional and respect the facts. When it comes to their trust in NGOs, the environmental reporter thinks that environmental NGOs as environmental lobbyists have their own interests, so the media have to "have a more critical eye on the NGOs' initiatives". She explained that "the environmental NGOs are the same as business organizations or other kinds of lobby groups; and people tend to consider environmental NGOs as heroes, but they may not play the role of heroes all the time as they have their own interests, such as attracting members for their democratic legitimacy or getting influence in the environmental politics". The other news reporter has a similar perception. She thinks that trust is something to gain and she only trusts the NGOs which have clear agendas, then she can judge the validity of information provided by them. These journalists' similar perceptions on the NGOs further explain that the media are independent with their own judgment. Though all the communicator interviewees express that their principle of communication with the media is to be as transparent as possible, it seems that the journalists are still not sure whether some NGOs have any hidden agenda in their communication, which influences their trust in the NGOs. Therefore it can be inferred that the word "trust" may be not an appropriate word to describe journalists' perception on NGOs since the journalists consider themselves to be critical and independent.

5.3 Communication Goals and Strategies

On the basis of what have been discussed above, we can see a general trend that the relationship between the NGOs and the media is cooperative but strategic, especially for NGOs who want their messages to be published by news media. Therefore NGOs may need communication strategies in order to achieve their goals. Before going into different communication strategies of these NGOs, we have to discuss their communication goals in the first place. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, “an act begins with a problem to be solved, a goal to be reached, something to be overcome by the human being in the environment” (Charon 2007, p.124). Human beings are goal directed. Our mind is focused on goals. Everything we do aims to achieve some goals that we have established. In other words, the communication goals determine what kind of strategies to be adopted in the communication.

5.3.1 Communication Goals and Process

The goal of the environmental NGOs would be easily assumed as saving the environment and the world. This is, however, according to the communicator interviewees, the general goal and the meaning of the organizations. Then what are the communication goals for NGOs when they communicate with the media? As most of the interviewees mention, in the communication with the media, the NGOs’ most important goal is to get a large amount of media coverage. Then they can use the media coverage to fulfill their other objectives depending on different projects, such as fund-raising, public advocacy and policy impact. For instance, some NGOs aim to show the evidence by arousing the public’s awareness to politicians or decision makers with their large amount of media coverage that the issue they put forward has certain influence in the society; some also want to create public pressure on politicians or corporate leaders by drawing public attention with a large amount of media exposure in order to make a change. In addition, the communicator from SNF also suggests another one of the most important objectives in their communication with the media, which is “getting the organization’s name in people’s minds and journalists’ minds”. This objective echoes one of the two media’s functions for NGOs discussed above: propagandizing. Due to these common objectives of NGOs, a huge amount of media coverage is significant and it can be interpreted as a sign of success for NGOs in their communication with the media. Most of these NGO communicators also express that they have certain ways to measure how much media coverage they get in order to evaluate the communication, such as technical devices provided by some providers or counting the numbers of the articles with their organizations’ names.

After the goals and objectives are established, NGOs need to start designing their communication plans. Then what kind of communication model do they use? In the interviews, none of them mentioned their communication models. However, it can be analyzed that the relevance model is quite popularly used among these NGOs.

Firstly, though these NGOs have the objectives pertaining to the public when communicating with the media, they have no means to evaluate the effect. Most of these communicators admit that it is difficult to monitor the effect through feedback from the public

since they do not have the resources and time to monitor it. They have no means to monitor how many people pay attention to the issues they are putting forward or whether the public's environmental awareness has been aroused after getting the message. Monitoring the feedback from the public is time-consuming and it is also highly costly. This is actually the criticism of the classical communication model (Nitsch 2000). Even if they have had the resources to monitor the feedback, it would be hard to measure what is the communication effect. Take an example from a communicator. Sometimes they find the public have changed their sustainable behaviors after the media coverage, but it is difficult to figure out the true reason behind, which means, the changing behavior may be caused by other reasons other than the media exposure. Therefore among these NGOs, though they (sender) deliver their messages through the news media (channel) to the public (receiver), there is no further evaluation of the feedback and effect, then their communication is not the classical communication model.

Moreover, in these interviews, most of communicators reveal that they always think about the target groups' needs, interests or backgrounds when they design their communication strategies. When the communicators formulate their message, they need to think about the target group's needs, and they also need to think about the target group's precondition to receive the message when they choose which media they should approach. For instance, the communicator from Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation express that when they design their communication plan, they would choose regional media or national media, newspaper or magazine according to their different target groups and different objectives. Another communicator also gave an example of their green electronics campaign: because they perceive their target group as well-educated people, the message that they are formulating does not have to be easy to be understood. Both of these examples from the communicators show us that when NGOs design their communication plan, there is an encounter and an exchange between sender and the target group.

Actually, from this communication format, we can infer that there is not only one receiver existing in the communication between NGOs and the media. Although the media function as the channel or tool for NGOs to deliver messages, the media can also be regarded as the receiver of the message in this communication since the media play a role of gatekeeper who have right to decide what news to be published. In this communication, the communicators need to consider the interests or needs of their target groups, as well as the media's interests. Therefore the communicators not only need to analyze their target group according to their projects in order to understand the target group's needs and interests, but also need to pay attention to the media's needs which is actually what the society needs. After the analysis of the receivers, the senders have to set up their objectives of the communication, think of the content of the message, choose what kind of media they can approach, implement their strategies and then evaluate their media coverage in order to improve their strategies if it does not work well. This communication process corresponds to the relevance communication model presented above in the theory section.

5.3.2 Communication Strategies

The communication between NGOs and the media is strategic, especially for the NGOs.

In order to fulfill their objectives, NGOs need to have certain strategies towards the media. In this section, some of these strategies that the NGOs are using will be discussed.

In the interviews, there was one question about the NGOs' communication strategies being asked to the interviewees. However, what is interesting is that, when it comes to the communication strategies, these communicators seldom formulate their answers very clearly. So it seems that they do not have a well-done communication strategy template, as most of them answer this question with "it depends". But when they introduce how they communicate with the media, they always bring up something they do which can be interpreted as the "strategies". Accordingly, it is worthwhile to point out that some strategies are acknowledged by the interviewees explicitly as their "strategies", while some others can be assumed to be used without users' awareness or to be taken for granted by the users.

Then what are the acknowledged strategies for the communicators? Though most of the communicators express that they always design their strategies differently depending on their different projects, some valuable strategies have been brought up. First of all, in some NGOs, they arrange their general communication work strategically. At least two communicators express that they do not work alone when they plan their communication with the media. For example, in Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation, the communicators work together with project managers. The communicators are in charge of designing environmental communication. The project managers are the ones who contact the media directly. This is, according to the interviewee, because the communicators have the knowledge on communication and the media but they are not experts in projects, while, the project managers are the professionals in certain projects and they know more about the target groups. In SNF, the communicators also work together with project managers in different stages of the communication. This strategy can be interpreted that this arrangement complements the weakness of the environmental communicators. As what have been discussed before, these NGOs are using the relevance communication model and the media is also the receiver together with the target groups. Although the environmental communicators probably have much knowledge about the media and they are highly capable of taking the role of journalists, they may not be competent to take the role of target groups and understand the needs of target groups. Therefore by cooperating with project managers, the communicators can use their expertise to analyze both of their receivers.

Furthermore, adjusting to the media's agenda is another one of the most important strategies according to the interviewees. As the communicator from SNF express, they have to create their messages or stories in a way that fits to the media's way of thinking if they really want to get some space in the media. What is this media's way of thinking? The interviewee explains it as "news-like". Then what is news really like? In his book *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, Cox (2006, p.175) elaborates clearly that the media play a role as the gatekeeper in news production: they have the right to decide what story can be covered. The criteria of this decision are based on newsworthiness which refers to "the ability of a news story to attract readers or viewers". There are some rules that the news media conform to. According to Cox, one or more of eight important criteria have been used by journalists to select and frame or report environmental news: 1) prominence, 2) timeliness, 3) proximity, 4) impact, 5) magnitude, 6) conflict, 7) oddity and 8) emotional

impact (Cox 2006). Besides, there are three more specific characteristics for environmental news. First, environmental news should be event-centered, such as oil spills; next, there is tendency that environmental news coverage is characterized by a visual component; besides, environmental news can cover an issue with a lengthy process, like climate change (Anderson 1997, p.121). These are theoretical features and criteria for news media, some of which are really being used in practice by NGOs when they approach journalists, according to the interviewees. Moreover, another feature of environmental news has been brought up by some interviewees that it would be better if the news have local link. As one of the communicator explains, it is hard for a story to spread if there is no local link to it. Actually this feature not only provides a direction for the communicators to formulate messages, but also can reflect the importance of choosing the right media.

The above-mentioned strategies are the communication strategies that these NGOs think they have as so-called “strategies”. However, it seems that there are some other interesting strategies being used by these NGOs which they are not aware of or they do not acknowledge as their “strategies”. These communication strategies have been inferred either from what the environmental communicators have said or from the journalists.

Firstly, some NGOs seek help from PR companies when they need to communicate with the media. In the interviews, one communicator mentioned briefly that her organization sometimes consults a PR agency. This act is interpreted as one of the strategies of the NGO because PR companies always help NGOs design a set of communication strategies. A PR consultant who is mainly dealing with the communication between NGOs and the media expresses that many NGOs choose to cooperate with PR companies for certain projects and look for communication plans from PR companies, even the big international NGOs like Greenpeace. According to her, although some environmental communicators have background as journalists and they know how to write good press release or organize press conference, they may not be good at communication with journalists. For instance, she gives an example: some environmental communicators like to contact journalists through emails or in other written form, but they ignored the importance to talk with journalists directly by phone or face-to-face which is a better way of interaction. Here it seems that she also implies that though the knowledge on the media is quite important, the interpersonal communication skills can not be neglected in the interaction. Besides, as what have been said before, the communicators may share the perspective of journalists, and all the perspectives are biases. Sometimes the communicators may be biased by what they have known, then they may need advices from an outsider with another perspective when they get stuck. Furthermore, this PR consultant reveals that they also provide a PR-handbook for NGOs with some practical suggestions on how to approach the media and the public, how to make a call to journalists, how to prepare for TV’s morning couch, and how to choose news angles, etc. Therefore for the environmental communicators, consulting PR companies is one of the best strategies when they design their communication plan towards the media.

Secondly, according to one of the journalist interviewees, some NGOs are sending different parts of the messages or stories to different media. Since all the journalists want their report to be exclusive, NGOs divide their messages or stories into different parts in order to attract the different media and get huge news exposure without saying so to different

journalists. This is interpreted as one strategy because the NGOs are taking the advantage of the media's feature of exclusiveness. They are probably not sure that how much news coverage they can get if they give the whole story to a single newspaper. Therefore they are using this strategy to accomplish their own goals. Thirdly, another strategy which none of communicator interviewees bring up is that NGOs always send newsletters to the journalists. This way of communication can be perceived as a strategy since it is a way that NGOs are using to remind the media of their existence. The journalists express that they always receive a lot of newsletters from NGOs which they have never subscribed. This kind of newsletters is informative and provides the updated news about what NGOs are putting forward recently. Actually this strategy works very well for journalists, they reveal. Though the journalists seldom read these newsletters, these NGOs will come to their minds once the journalists have some related topics. However, though this strategy works well for the journalists, none of the communicator interviewees mentioned it. Finally, "networking" can also be considered as one strategy of NGOs which cannot be underestimated, according to one of the journalist interviewees. According to her, many environmental communicators take the opportunities to network with journalists so as to make journalists aware of them, like in the line to the bathroom or in the dinner party, etc. and it really works on her. This is a good communication strategy as it is a way of connecting with journalists. However, this is also neglected by the communicator interviewees in the interviews. This can be perceived as a basic human communication strategy that human beings are always using, which is effective not only for environmental communication but also for all kinds of human interaction. This could be the reason why the communicators ignore it as they take it for granted.

To sum up, there are different types of communication strategies being used by the Swedish environmental NGOs. Some of these strategies are acknowledged by these NGOs think but some are not. The communicators could leave out those strategies on purpose or unconsciously. These unacknowledged strategies look simple so that they tend to be taken for granted or be not perceived as "strategies". However, these strategies can play essential roles in the communication. PR companies can provide thorough analysis of the communication situation from another perspective for NGOs since the communicators are easily getting blind by their perspectives and goals; newsletters can always help communicators gain a position in journalists' minds; and networking is an indispensable human communication strategy since it can help people build interpersonal connection with each other. These simple strategies can more directly illustrate how the NGOs try their best to communicate with the media in order to achieve their goals.

5.4 Social Influences

After the interviews with the environmental communicators, an impression was made that the social influences of the NGOs affected their ways of communication with the media. This assumption was confirmed later on by one journalist interviewee.

Among all the interviews, Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation is a relatively small Swedish NGO; SNF is one of the biggest Swedish NGO. When being asked who always initiated the communication between their NGOs and the media, the communicators from different NGOs gave different answers. The communicator from Keep Sweden Tidy Foundation admits that

they always contact the media first; but the communicator from SNF expresses that the media always come to them for information and comments. When this question was asked to one journalist interviewee, she said that she always started the communication with NGOs. This simple question cannot be underestimated, since it can illustrate a way of showing the different social influences that these NGOs have. As what have been analyzed above, the communication between NGOs and the media is two-way. NGOs need the media to deliver their messages, raise the public awareness or give pressure to politicians, and the media also need NGOs when they have any questions regarding the environment or when they want comments from professional environmentalists. Therefore when the media need information from NGOs, the influential NGOs tend to come to journalists' minds first because they have reputation and influence among the public. In the interviews, one journalist interviewee and the communicator from SNF both confirmed that this social influence does affect NGOs' communication with the media.

Since this social influence play an important role in the communication, an assumption was made after the interviews with the environmental communicators that these NGOs might have competition with each other in their communication with the media. This assumption was made, on one hand, because of NGOs' communication goals when they approach the media. The goal of these NGOs in their communication with the media is to get a large amount of media coverage in order to fulfill other objectives. On the other hand, as discussed previously, the fame is important for NGOs for fund-raising, public advocacy, policy impact, or maybe even drawing members, etc. and the news coverage can help them build reputation, then they may compete with each other for the media coverage. Finally, this assumption was confirmed by the last interviewee, an environmental journalist who has many years' experience communicating with different NGOs. She confirms it by giving an example that other NGOs would be disappointed or upset if a spokesperson's name from one NGO always has appeared in her article.

5.5 Communication Difficulty

In the interviews, all the interviewees seldom identify any difficulties or conflicts in their communication. However, one communication problem can be discovered in their conversations that NGOs, as what have been mentioned before, cannot always get their stories published in the same way they expect. Though most of the environmental communicators have background or experience in journalism and they may understand the perspective of journalists, they still have this problem in their communication.

This problem is actually determined by the different perspectives. Perspective is a framework which influences what people see and what people believe so as to affect what people do (Figure 1). In spite of a good command of taking the role of journalists, environmental communicators are still biased by their perspectives; "...even if we do take the role of the other and accurately capture the perspective of that other, we still cannot leave our own perspective aside, and our understanding of the other will be colored, in part, by our own perspective" (Charon 2007, p.108). This very perspective that the environmental communicators have is formed by their identities. They are not journalists any more. Instead, they work in NGOs as communicators who communicate with journalists strategically, and

they have their new roles and new missions. We discussed above that the communicators can understand the perspective of journalists because of their background and experience, but an individual has many perspective and his or her perspective will change as the individual's role changes (Charon 2007). Being in different surroundings and taking a different role, these environmental communicators adopt a new perspective which can color their definition of the situation when they are taking the role of journalists. The new roles of these communicators create a filter for them to perceive and interpret reality. The different identities of the communicators and journalists determine their different perspectives which influence what they see, what they believe and what they act in the communication. This is also the explanation why they perceive the same things differently, as both of their "realities" are only parts of reality due to their different perspectives. Then something valuable to the communicators may not be attractive to journalists; the same message can be interpreted differently by the journalist as a result of different perspective. Both perspectives show the truth but they perceive reality from different angles and in different approaches. This is the reason why this communication problem cannot be avoided.

All in all, this whole section of empirical discussion is based on personal interpretation of the interview data. The data are interpreted mainly from symbolic interactionism and the theory of environmental communication. There may be alternative approaches to interpret the data, which can lead to different conclusions. As what have been analyzed before, any perspective is a bias. Hence this interpretation of the data only represents one angle. Moreover there may be some other limitations in this interpretation. First, the interpretation was made from the information collected from the interviewees and all the interviews were conducted mainly in a semi-structured way with some guiding questions. Then the questions chosen for the interviews may be limited by my assumptions and pre-understanding, and the questions can tend to direct the interviewees to answer in the way I expect. Second, all the interpretations are based on the data selected from the interviews. The selected data are believed to be relevant to the aim of this thesis; however, some data which have not been chosen for this research may be also important for this research but ignored. Thirdly, the interpretation is done through a personal filter which is subjective. The interpretation is made from the answers of the interview questions, the interviewees' expressions and their body languages. But it may happen that the same answer can be interpreted differently by two or more people, for instance, the same expression like a smile can be interpreted as agreement or maybe reluctance. In addition, the interpretation can also be biased by the knowledge that I have. As the interviews were going on, I gradually accumulated more and more knowledge about the topic. Then in the next interviews, I might be biased by what I had already known from previous interviewees and take some details for granted without deeper investigation.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the interactive relationship between some environmental NGOs and the media in Sweden has been investigated. The data collected from the interviews in this paper have been analyzed and interpreted with the theories of symbolic interactionism and environmental communication. After analyzing the communication between these NGOs and the media, some conclusions can be drawn.

In the first place, a trend can be found out that the relationship between the environmental NGOs and the media is perceived as cooperative. In the paper, it has been discussed that the environmental NGOs need the media to deliver the messages and approach the public or politicians to different extents. Accordingly, the media are very important for NGOs, even though some NGOs may not have much connection with the media and some of them have their own ways to deliver messages. The media play a role as the channel for NGOs to help them fulfill their different objectives. Equally, environmental NGOs are indispensable to the media since the journalists always need comments and ideas from professional environmentalists. Then the communication between NGOs and the media is a two-way communication. From the empirical study, we can see that the communicators from different NGOs trust the media on different levels, which can be attributed to the different background and experience they have; whereas, the journalists believe that they need to take a critical attitude toward NGOs since NGOs may have hidden agendas.

Secondly, this study also mirrors that the relationship between the environmental NGOs and the media can also be considered as strategic because they need communication strategies to interact with each other, especially for NGOs as analyzed in this paper. For NGOs, this environmental communication can be regarded as an environmental marketing since they are trying to sell their stories and messages to the media. Then the communicators have to design their communication plans well and apply some communication strategies in order to fulfill their communication goals. After the analysis, we can conclude that NGOs are using the relevance communication model to design their communication plans towards the media, that is, the communicators formulate their messages according to the perceived needs of the target group and the media and they also present the message in the way that is relevant to the target group's precondition and potentials for receiving. Therefore the communicators need a thorough pre-analysis of the target group and the media. In addition, some communication strategies that NGOs always apply have been studied in the paper. As analyzed in the paper, not all the presented strategies are acknowledged explicitly by the communicator interviewees. Some of them are from the journalists and some of them are concluded or inferred from what the communicators have said. Hence, it can be concluded that some strategies which are not acknowledged by the communicators can be perceived as something they are not aware of or something they take for granted. Besides, we can also find out from the empirical discussion that not only the professional environmental communication strategies are important, but also the interpersonal communication skills cannot be underestimated.

Furthermore, the goals for these environmental NGOs in their communication with the media have also been investigated in the paper. The main goal for NGOs to communicate with the media is to get a huge amount of news coverage, because this goal can contribute to the success of other objectives that NGOs have in their different projects, such as fund-raising, public advocacy or policy impact. Therefore the criterion for NGOs to evaluate their effect of communication with the media is the numbers of the news coverage. The amount of news coverage can also help the organizations build their reputations and their social influence..

Finally, there is no conflict found out in this study between NGOs and the media, yet, a communication problem has been identified. However, after the analysis in this paper, we can see that this problem is unavoidable, as it is caused by different identities and perspectives

that the environmental communicators and the journalists have.

7. References

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