

16
Chapter

Greenwashing in India: The Role of Journalism in Shaping Corporate Sustainability Narratives

Mizanur Rahaman¹ & Deepak Upadhyaya²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,
Tripura University, Agartala, Tripura

²Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,
Tripura University, Agartala, Tripura

Abstract

The chapter discusses greenwashing in India as a communication phenomenon shaped by the mediating role of journalism. Moving beyond a corporation-centric view, it argues that the credibility and circulation of sustainability claims depend significantly on how they are framed, amplified, or interrogated within news media. The analysis presents a conditional argument i.e. journalism can both accelerate and de-accelerate greenwashing. Drawing on literature from journalism studies, environmental communication, and political economy, the chapter analyses three interrelated dimensions—structural, professional, and cognitive. Structural factors such as advertising dependence and corporate ownership create incentives for non-critical coverage. Professional factors, including reliance on PR content and time constraints, facilitate unfiltered dissemination of corporate narratives. Cognitive factors, particularly gaps in environmental literacy among journalists, further reduce critical scrutiny. While investigative and data-driven journalism can challenge misleading

claims, such efforts remain episodic. Overall, journalism emerges as a site of contestation where greenwashing is both reproduced and resisted.

Keywords: *Greenwashing, Journalism, Corporate Sustainability, ESG, Political Economy of Media, PR Journalism, Environmental Communication*

Introduction

From the products we buy to the advertisements we see, environmental claims have become a common part of our everyday life. Labels such as “eco-friendly”, “green”, and “sustainable”, etc. appear frequently. However, the meanings of these terms, how they are measured, and whether these terms actually represent an environmental impact is very unclear (Advertising Standards Council of India, 2024; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Within this gap between claim and verification the problem of greenwashing emerges. Greenwashing broadly means the deliberate framing of misleading or exaggerated claims about environmental practices of the company. It has become an increasingly major feature of corporate communication, including in India (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Yadav & Srivastava, 2024). As sustainability, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) frameworks, and climate responsibility gain economic and reputational value, companies are motivated not only to improve environmental initiatives but also to actively influence how others perceive the company’s effort on environment (Gillan et al., 2021).

This is where journalism becomes crucial. Media does not simply pass the corporate claims about environment. But it plays an important role in shaping of those claims’ interpretation, reception in the public sphere. Through processes of priming and framing, media influences which corporate sustainability narratives get more attention and how those narratives are understood by audiences (Entman, 1993). Those claims receive consistent and uncritical coverage can develop a sense of credibility, even when their factual base remains weak (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Here, news coverage varies in degree. On one side, it can amplify the sustainability narratives from the corporate by presenting them as credible without questioning them. On the other side, it can question those claims by examining evidence,

and aligning the claims within broader environmental realities (Bednar, 2012; Miller, 2006; Pollach, 2014). Media's function in either of the roles depends not only on editorial choices but also on the conditions of news production (Tuchman, 1972). Thus, greenwashing is not only produced by corporations, but it is normalized, or challenged by the media (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

The current chapter presents a conditional argument in this context. As journalism can accelerate greenwashing by just reproducing corporate narratives without questioning, it also can de-accelerate greenwashing through investigative reporting, critical scrutiny, and deeper analysis of corporate environmental claims. Whichever the role media play, it is not fixed but conditional. To analyse this conditionality, the chapter discusses through three interconnected dimensions. Structural factors, such as the political economy of Indian media, advertising dependence, and media ownership pattern. These shape the broader environment within which journalism operates. Professional factors, such as newsroom practices, and the increasing reliance on PR-generated content. These factors determine how corporate sustainability narratives enter and circulate via news content. Cognitive factors, particularly journalists' knowledge and awareness about environment and sustainability. These factors affect whether such narratives are critically examined or reproduced.

The chapter is a literature-driven analysis that synthesises insights from journalism studies, environmental communication, and political economy of media in India. Rather than treating greenwashing as just an isolated corporate misconduct, the chapter tries to understand it within a broader communication system in which journalism functions as a key mediator of meaning and credibility.

Greenwashing in India: Context and Patterns

Greenwashing in India is no longer an occasional practice. It is now a prevalent concern among Indian companies. Research indicates that a high number of large companies in India engage in greenwashing. Almost half of NIFTY 50 companies show discrepancies between ESG disclosures and actual performance (Gidage et al., 2025). A similar estimate suggests that more than half of firms exhibit such tendencies (Sensharma et al.,

2022). These show that greenwashing is not an exception but a normalised feature of corporate sustainability communication in India.

There can be found few common patterns regarding greenwashing in India. One such prominent type is selective disclosure, in which companies highlight only positive environmental initiatives and omit the negative impacts of their operations. This practice is evident in ESG reporting, where companies' disclosure scores often exceed their actual environmental performance (Gidage et al., 2025). A second common pattern is the use of vague and ambiguous claims, such as terms like "eco-friendly" or "green," that lack measurable meaning. Studies on Indian advertisements show that a large proportion of environmental claims fall into this vague-claim category. Many claims are just shallow, non-specific, and difficult to verify (Fernando et al., 2014). A related pattern is credence-based communication. Claims that cannot be independently verified by consumers, such as "100% natural" or "environmentally safe", without any supporting evidence. Another common pattern is symbolic or executional greenwashing. In this pattern environmental claim is constructed through imagery and visual representation rather than actual facts. Advertisements often use imagery of nature, green colors, and environmental events to convey the sustainability message without providing concrete information (Prasad et al., 2017). Greenwashing also often takes place in the form of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) masking. In this practice companies use CSR initiatives to project environmental commitment while their core operations remain environmentally harmful (Mishra & Muraleedharan, 2020). Notably, greenwashing is not only limited to corporate communication. It is also present in regulatory processes. The conditions for environmental clearance in major infrastructure projects are often vague, and lacking scientific grounding, effectively producing a form of institutional or state-level greenwashing (Hegde et al., 2022).

Greenwashing practices by Indian corporates is combination of structural and institutional factors. One such important reason is weak regulation. Particularly the weak guidelines for CSR and environmental governance allows the companies to prioritise token compliance ahead of real action and change (Mishra & Muraleedharan, 2020). Another major factor is institutional

pressure. Economic incentives, regulatory expectations, social norms, and competitive dynamics push companies to take the shortcut of greenwashing to look sustainable. Companies may engage in greenwashing to gain the attention of investors, align with industry trends, or maintain legitimacy in a market where sustainability has increasing reputational value (Chakraborty et al., 2025).

The growth of ESG discourse and green finance has made these incentives even stronger. As sustainability becomes valuable for branding, and also financially, companies are more likely to manage their environmental image very tactically. Although, this has created a situation where sustainability initiatives do not reflect into actual environmental benefits. Studies suggest that even the use of sustainable technologies can fail to improve real environmental outcomes if it is embraced with greenwashing-driven system (Das et al., 2024). This emphasises that greenwashing can distort not just perception, but also the effectiveness of sustainability interventions.

In India, greenwashing is driven by weak guidelines, institutional pressures and the growing value of sustainability narratives. It is characterised by identifiable patterns such as selective disclosure, vague claims, symbolic representation, and regulatory ambiguity. It is sustained not only by corporate strategy but, more critically, by communicative conditions that shape how environmental claims are produced, circulated, and interpreted. Within this communicative process, journalism becomes a key mediating force. In India, this mediation is shaped by three dimensions—structural, professional, and cognitive—which together influence whether corporate environmental narratives are critically examined or simply reproduced.

Structural Factors: Political Economy of Business Journalism

The ability of journalism to critically analyse corporate sustainability narratives is fundamentally influenced by the structural conditions under which media functions. Indian media's political economy is decided by a high dependence on advertisement. A major share of media revenue comes from advertisement by corporates. And the same corporates are the subjects of coverage by media (FICCI-EY, 2024).

This conflict creates an inherent structural tension. It is expected that media organisations will act as watchdogs while also relying on the corporate they cover to stay in business. In practice, this

often results in soft or non-confrontational coverage of corporate actors, particularly those with significant advertising presence (Chadha, 2017). It becomes financially risky to be critical of environmental claims, while neutral or positive coverage fits with the incentives of institutions (Mishra, 2020).

The situation is made complex by how Indian media companies are owned. Many media organisations work as part of larger conglomerates with diverse business interests. Such cross-ownership structures make the boundary opaque between editorial independence and business strategy. When media houses are circled with a broader corporate network, there is a structural disincentive to pursue reporting that could conflict with allied business interests (Maheshwari & Sparks, 2021).

Greenwashing in this context rarely is result of direct editorial policies. But it happens because of incentive system. Coverage that makes corporate sustainability fit well with how media companies make money from ads. They also fit with what is the interest of the owners of these media companies. By contrast, critical environmental reporting remains structurally constrained (Ali et al., 2025). Thus, the political economy of Indian media does not simply influence coverage. It shapes the conditions under which corporate narratives are more likely to be reproduced rather than investigated.

Professional Factors: Newsroom Practices and PR Journalism

Apart from structural factors, the practices journalists embrace in their work influence the kind of news content they produce and share. In today's Indian media, newsrooms work under constant pressure to produce and circulate content quickly. The demand for continuous updates means high speed, efficiency, and volume. And this often push depth and careful verification at the back-seat (Batra & Upmanyu, 2023). This is closely related to the transformation of business journalism, where content increasingly reflects market-oriented priorities and real-time information flows rather than critical analysis.

In a constrained environment like this, business journalists often turn to readily available resources. Pre-packaged materials from PR (public relations) section of companies often become the source of news and journalists frequently reproduce press releases and briefings with minimal modification. Studies from Indian regional media contexts shows that this dependence can be so pronounced that large portions of business news

are directly shaped by PR inputs, with limited independent verification or reinterpretation (Sahoo & Nayak, 2021). As a result, journalism increasingly takes the form of “PR journalism,” where the distinction between reporting and promotion becomes structurally blurred.

This phenomenon is even compounded by news production cycle. The stress on fast, quick and immediate publication of news results only reproducing the claims by the corporates without enough scrutiny. The time and expertise required for investigative or interpretative journalism are often unavailable, particularly in understaffed or commercially driven news environments (Sahoo & Nayak, 2021). More broadly, the reliance on elite and institutional sources within the media system ensures that dominant narratives—especially those aligned with corporate interests—are reproduced with minimal contestation (Tripathi, 2024).

The increase of branded content, advertorials complicate the issue even more. Cases such as “medianet,” private treaties, and paid news establish the addition of promotional content within editorial spaces, often without clear disclosure (Tripathi, 2024). These paid content formats are designed to look and sound like news and difficult for readers to distinguish between news reporting and sponsored content.

Another important factor related to journalists’ practice is the decline and transformation of investigative journalism. Investigative reporting is almost always resource-intensive, requiring lot of fieldwork and technical expertise, making it difficult to sustain in fast-paced and resource-constrained news environments. Investigative journalism has not only declined but also shifted in form. What is presented as “investigative” increasingly becoming as selective or “pseudo-investigative” reporting aligned and favoured with dominant power (Chadha, 2022; Kumar & Bhat, 2025).

These professional practices are not just operational constraints but a systematic method of news publication. They normalise the reproduction of corporate narratives in news while limiting critical investigation. Thus, journalism not only just fail to challenge misleading or exaggerated environmental claims, but it structurally embraces their circulation, contributing to the wider reproduction of greenwashing within public discourse.

Cognitive Factors: Limits of Environmental and Sustainability Literacy

Environmental news reporting requires comparatively complex subjects such as ESG metrics, carbon accounting and regulatory frameworks. Analysing these topics calls for specialized knowledge about the domains. But in India, environmental news is often covered by general reporters without sufficient scientific training. This limits the scope of critically interpreting claims by corporates (Mishra, 2020; Ogadimma, 2024).

The situation creates a gap between the complexity of environmental reporting and journalistic ability. Research shows limited use of expert sources and a reliance on institutional sources in the environmental news. Studies also show the dominance of informational, event-based reporting rather than analytical reporting in environmental news (Parimala & Maheswari, 2025).

As a result, technically valid claims often go unquestioned when they are being presented in a misleading way. This reflects an epistemic vulnerability in journalism, where cognitive limitations, which is often independent of structural or professional pressures, enable the uncritical reproduction of greenwashing narratives.

When Journalism Accelerates Greenwashing

Structural, professional, and cognitive factors make journalism to facilitate greenwashing rather than challenge it. Sustainability claims by companies enter the news cycle through press releases or PR content. After that those claims get legitimacy, credibility by uncritical reproduction of those. Over time, this circulation normalizes such claims and shapes audience perceptions of their credibility.

In every stage of news publication cycle, the absence of critical interference becomes the crucial point for the acceleration of greenwashed content through media. Structural conditions—especially advertising dependence and ownership of media. Professional routines, including reliance on briefing or PR content provided by the companies. At the same time, cognitive limitations constrain journalists' ability to evaluate complex sustainability claims.

The result of all these is reinforcement of greenwashing. Sustainability narratives gain visibility and legitimacy regardless of their factual validity. Greenwashing becomes effective not primarily because corporates persuade it, but because of its repeated circulation. This reflects a systemic tendency in which media conditions privilege amplification over interrogation.

When Journalism De-Accelerates Greenwashing

With all the limitations, journalism can challenge greenwashing by shifting its focus from simply reproducing corporate claims to critically examining them. Investigative reporting plays an important role here. It can expose the gaps between corporate claims and actual practices of the companies through evidence-based analysis. Approaches that rely on data and systematic scrutiny of sustainability claims can further strengthen this role.

Structural pressures, resource constraints, and market-oriented news production restrict the essence of critical, investigative, analytical journalism. As a result, while journalism can challenge greenwashing, such efforts remain episodic rather than systemic. De-acceleration of greenwashing functions as a counter-tendency within Indian media environment that otherwise tends toward the amplification of corporate sustainability narratives.

Discussion: Journalism as a Place of Contestation

This chapter goes beyond a simple view of journalism as either an enabler of greenwashing or a force of greenwashing resistance. It sees journalism as a place of contestation shaped by structural, professional, and cognitive dimensions. Structurally, advertising dependence and corporate ownership set limits on critical reporting. These factors do not directly control the news content but influence what is commercially viable for the media house. Professionally, newsroom practices, such as reliance on press releases, PR content and fast-paced news publication make journalists to embrace corporate narratives within news output without critical inquiry. Cognitive limitations further reinforce this dynamic. The technical complexity of environmental reporting creates an epistemic gap, reducing journalists' ability to critically evaluate claims even in the absence of overt pressure.

These factors explain why greenwashing persists as a communicative phenomenon. It is not the result of a single facet but of numbers of constraints that favor narrative reproduction.

At the same time, instances of critical reporting show that journalism can disrupt this process, though such efforts remain contingent and uneven. Thus, journalism is best understood as a structurally embedded and professionally negotiated field, where both amplification and interrogation of greenwashing coexist.

Conclusion

Greenwashing in India exists not just simply as a corporate communication strategy but as a mediated phenomenon shaped by how sustainability claims are framed, legitimized, published across news media. Journalism plays a crucial role in this process, not as a passive transmitter but as an institution that actively conditions the credibility and reach of corporate narratives.

The analysis shows a combination of structural, professional and cognitive factors that collectively favor the reproduction of green claims. Economic dependence on advertising and corporate ownership of media organisations narrows the space for critical reporting. Newsroom practices, such as speed, resource constraints, and reliance on PR content ease the uncritical entry of corporate narratives into news output. At the same time, the complexity of environmental issues limits untrained journalists' capacity to rigorously scrutinise the sustainability claims by the corporates. These overlapping conditions make the normalization of greenwashing less an exception and more a systemic tendency.

The understanding is apparent that to fight with greenwashing in India requires transforming the conditions under which journalism functions, rebuilding investigative depth in reporting rather than fast publication, and increasing environmental domain knowledge among journalists. These are essential for shifting journalism from a tool of corporate narrative reproduction to a tool of scrutiny. Otherwise, greenwashing will continue to persist in India via media.

References

- Advertising Standards Council of India. (2024). *Guidelines for advertisements making environmental/green claims*. <https://www.ascionline.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Guidelines-for-Advertisements-Making-Environmental-Green-Claims.pdf>

- Ali, Z., Singh, P., Pandey, S., & Kumar, R. S. (2025). Indian media and ecological issues. *Environment Conservation Journal*, 26(4), 1574–1582. <https://doi.org/10.36953/ECJ.33293102>
- Batra, D., & Upmanyu, A. (2023). An Analysis of Indian Business Journalism Over Three Decades. *Communicator*, LVIII(4), 46–60.
- Bednar, M. K. (2012). Watchdog or Lapdog? A Behavioral View of the Media as a Corporate Governance Mechanism. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(1), 131–150. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.0862>
- Chadha, K. (2017). The Indian news media industry: Structural trends and journalistic implications. *Global Media and Communication*, 13(2), 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517704674>
- Chadha, K. (2022). India's Imperiled Public Sphere: Challenges to Independent Journalism in the World's Largest Democracy. In *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Chakraborty, D., Bresciani, S., & Troise, C. (2025). The role of institutional pressures in greenwashing: A two-phase study on company behavior. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 44(5), 849–868. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJBM-08-2024-0485>
- Das, N., Gangopadhyay, P., Alam, M. M., Mahmood, H., Bera, P., Khudoykulov, K., Dey, L., & Hossain, Md. E. (2024). Does greenwashing obstruct sustainable environmental technologies and green financing from promoting environmental sustainability? Analytical evidence from the Indian economy. *Sustainable Development*, 32(1), 1069–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2722>
- de Freitas Netto, S. V., Sobral, M. F. F., Ribeiro, A. R. B., & Soares, G. R. da L. (2020). Concepts and forms of greenwashing: A systematic review. *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 32(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-0300-3>
- Delmas, M. A., & Burbano, V. C. (2011). The Drivers of Greenwashing. *California Management Review*, 54(1), 64–87. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2011.54.1.64>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Fernando, A. G., Sivakumaran, B., & Suganthi, L. (2014). Nature of green advertisements in India: Are they greenwashed? *Asian Journal of Communication*, 24(3), 222–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2014.885537>
- FICCI-EY. (2024). #Reinvent: India's media & entertainment sector is innovating for the future. <https://www.ey.com/content/dam/ey-unified-site/ey-com/en-in/insights/media-entertainment/documents/ey-in-india-s-media-entertainment-sector-is-innovating-for-the-future-03-2024-v3.pdf>

- Gidage, M., Bhide, S., & Bilan, Y. (2025). Greenwashing in the Indian corporate landscape: An empirical assessment of ESG disclosures of NIFTY 50 companies. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 27(9), 21861–21885. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-024-05191-3>
- Gillan, S. L., Koch, A., & Starks, L. T. (2021). Firms and social responsibility: A review of ESG and CSR research in corporate finance. *Journal of Corporate Finance*, 66, 101889. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2021.101889>
- Hegde, M., Patel, K., & Diduck, A. P. (2022). Environmental clearance conditions in impact assessment in India: Moving beyond greenwash. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 40(3), 214–227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2022.2025689>
- Kumar, A., & Bhat, P. (2025). Investigating the Investigation: Media Capture and Investigative Journalism in India. *Journalism Practice*, 0(0), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2517116>
- Lyon, T. P., & Montgomery, A. W. (2015). The Means and End of Greenwash. *Organization & Environment*, 28(2), 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575332>
- Maheshwari, S., & Sparks, C. (2021). Political elites and journalistic practices in India: A case of institutionalized heteronomy. *Journalism*, 22(1), 231–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918761630>
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- Miller, G. S. (2006). The Press as a Watchdog for Accounting Fraud. *Journal of Accounting Research*, 44(5), 1001–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-679X.2006.00224.x>
- Mishra, M. (2020). Environmental journalism in India: Past, present, and future. In *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism*. Routledge.
- Mishra, M., & Muraleedharan, Y. K. (2020). GREENWASHING: A BY-PRODUCT OF INDIA'S FRAGILE CSR POLICIES. *The Chanakya Law Review (CLR)*, 1(1), 1–25.
- Ogadimma, E. C. (2024). The Green Beat: Exploring India's Environmental Journalism and Climate Change Issues: Environmental Journalism: Reporting on Environmental Concerns and Climate Change in India, by D. S. Poornananda, New Delhi, SAGE Publishing India, 2022, 368 pp., USD \$38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9789354793387. *Environmental Communication*, 18(4), 510–514. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2024.2342510>
- Parimala, S., & Maheswari, P. U. (2025). Analysis of Indian newspapers on the coverage of news on sustainable energy. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 27(11), 28221–28240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-025-06331-z>
- Pollach, I. (2014). Corporate Environmental Reporting and News Coverage of Environmental Issues: An Agenda-Setting Perspective. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 23(5), 349–360. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1792>

- Prasad, M., Mishra, T., Kalro, A. D., & Bapat, V. (2017). Environmental claims in Indian print advertising: An empirical study and policy recommendation. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 13(3), 473–490. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-05-2016-0091>
- Sahoo, S. K., & Nayak, S. C. (2021). The interplay of Public Relations and Business Journalism in Regional Media in Odisha. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(7), 14392–14402.
- Sensharma, S., Sinha, M., & Sharma, D. (2022). Do Indian Firms Engage in Greenwashing? Evidence from Indian Firms. *Australasian Accounting, Business and Finance Journal*, 16(5). <https://doi.org/10.14453/aabfj.v16i5.06>
- Tripathi, S. (2024). Corporate Cupidity Impacting News Framing and Media Discourse: A Threat to Media Credibility in India. *Journal of Communication and Management*, 3(04), 328–340. <https://doi.org/10.58966/JCM2024346>
- Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 660–679.
- Yadav, N. K., & Srivastava, S. (2024). *Strengthening Environmental Reporting Under BRSR: A CSE Guidance Brief*, Centre for Science and Environment. A CSE Guidance Brief, Centre for Science and Environment. <https://www.cseindia.org/strengthening-environmental-reporting-under-brsr-12199>