

Between Scare Quotes and Criminalization: Media Discourses of “Eco-Terrorism” (2020–2024)

D.L. Wuebben; N. Nasrawin; R. Meinhold

Abstract-

In print and online news media, “eco-terrorism” has been invoked to delegitimize nonviolent civil disobedience, obstruction, and symbolic sabotage. As the climate crisis intensifies, it is increasingly important to clearly identify different forms of environmental harm and activist resistance. The current study performs a discourse analysis of articles from print and online news sources published between 2020 and 2024 and cataloged in LexisUni (n=204). The results show that claims of “eco-terrorism” are often voiced by government officials, editorialists, or individual citizens writing letters to the editor; however, compared to previous research on media mentions in the United States between 1999 and 2009, professional journalists seem to contextualize or qualify claims of eco-terrorism more often, using “scare quotes” to implicitly question its validity. While this may somewhat lessen its rhetorical heft, the “terrorist” label and related criminalization of environmental activists charged under terrorism laws remain severe. Therefore, the persistent, uncritical usage of “eco-terrorism” and its continued conflation with “environmental terrorism” risks undermining democratic deliberation and public understanding of climate resistance. This research contributes to ongoing debates on media ethics and environmental justice while seeking a deeper understanding of the moral and scientific imperatives that motivate climate discourse.

Index Terms- Eco-terrorism; radical activism; climate change; protest; media discourse

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