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## EVIDENCE BRIEFING: ISSUE-ATTENTION CYCLES AND PLASTIC POLLUTION

### Summary

**Public attention rarely remains focused on individual environmental issues for long periods, even those that need urgent action. Finding ways to maintain public engagement with environmental threats is vital not just to encourage behaviour change but also to generate pressure for changes in business practice and policy.** This evidence briefing reviews recent work analysing how media and public issue-attention cycles affect the governance of problems resulting from the manufacture, use, and disposal of plastics. It explores trends in media coverage of plastics pollution, the influence of coverage on public pressure for action, and linkages between shifts in attention and measures to govern plastics locally, nationally and internationally. It shows that analysis of ways to manage issue-attention cycles can support greater action on plastics and other major environmental problems.

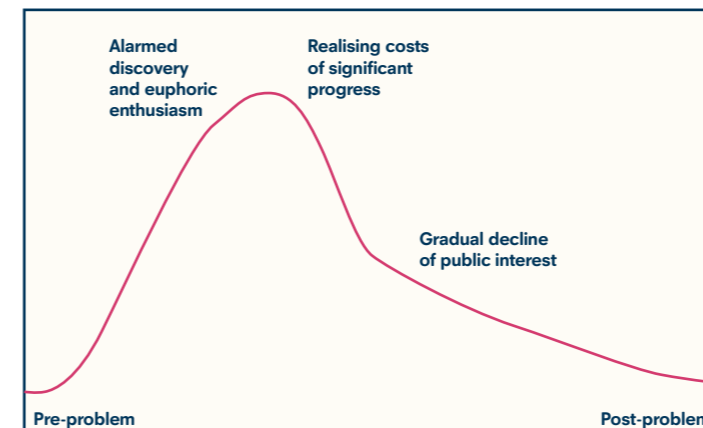
**“Inconsistencies in public attention to environmental problems represents a serious, but underexplored, challenge for environmental governance as the loss of media and public attention has eroded the impetus for policy to tackle many environmental issues”**



## Context

The issue-attention cycle has been used extensively to map how public attention waxes and wanes as issues enter the public consciousness and then fade from attention, even where policy and social responses to the problem are insufficient. Media coverage of environmental issues can provide important impetus for policy change but investigations into how issue-attention cycles influence the governance of environmental issues are limited. Addressing this gap can improve understanding of the influence of issue-attention cycles and help to inform the development of solutions to some of the world's most pressing environmental problems.

International efforts to reduce the flow of plastics into the marine environment have increased in recent decades. These include aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the 1996 Protocol to the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and other Matter, and provisions in Annex V of the revised 2013 International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) prohibiting the disposal of plastic from ships. The timing of these initiatives indicates that international action has evolved mainly in response to scientific evidence and institutional processes rather than spikes in media attention. Some nevertheless argue that international action on plastics relies too heavily on state enforcement and measures that cover plastics indirectly or focus on a limited number of plastics sources.



## Key points

- Fluctuations in media and public attention create challenges for the governance of environmental problems;
- There is limited research on how issue-attention cycles affect environmental governance processes;
- Public concern about plastics was triggered by traditional media but social media has acted as an important arena for debate and the dissemination of ideas, helping to maintain public interest and promote action;
- Increased media coverage can create simplified narratives about plastics pollution. This can raise public awareness but can also detract attention from the underlying causes of the problem. Opportunities for more far-reaching debate can also be missed when media coverage suggests quick fixes for the plastics problem;
- Continued public engagement with the plastics pollution issue is crucial to maintaining pressure on businesses, politicians and policymakers to act and to introduce initiatives to encourage behaviour change;
- Creating new surges in attention is challenging; existing methods to publicise the impact of plastics pollution are prone to audience fatigue. Re-framing the issue in potentially novel ways may help to re-energise interest;
- Campaigners, policymakers and others can anticipate and adapt initiatives in multiple ways to initiate, prolong and manage issue-attention cycles.

## Phases of the issue-attention cycle

### Pre-problem

Experts and special interest groups are aware of the problem but it has not captured the public imagination.

### Alarmed discovery

Increased media coverage of the problem, often triggered by an event. Public starts to demand solutions.

### Realisation of the costs

Increased public understanding of the efforts required to deal with the problem and of the potential financial, lifestyle and technological constraints. Enthusiasm for solutions dampens.

### Declining public interest

Public interest wanes as other issues gain attention.

### Post-problem

Issues enter a 'twilight realm' of lesser attention, although there may be recurring spikes in attention.

## Plastics and the issue-attention cycle

In recent years there has been rising public concern in the United Kingdom and other countries about plastics pollution. Research conducted during the 1980s and 1990s began to reveal the effects of discarded plastics on marine and terrestrial environments but gained only occasional media coverage (*pre-problem*). There was then a major increase in media and public attention to plastics following the BBC's Blue Planet II programme in 2017 (*alarmed discovery*). Research by one UK supermarket showed that 88% of people who watched the programme claimed to have changed their plastic consumption. Sixty per cent also reported using refillable water bottles and the supermarket saw an 800% increase in questions about plastics from customers<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [https://waitrose.pressarea.com/pressrelease/details/78/NEWS\\_13/10259](https://waitrose.pressarea.com/pressrelease/details/78/NEWS_13/10259)

## Media coverage of plastics pollution

Despite climate change and Covid-19 dominating media headlines in 2019-2021, some environmental problems (such as plastics pollution and climate change) remain high on news agendas, reflecting their severity and impact on large sections of the population. The debate on plastics pollution has now evolved to focus more on how the overuse of plastics can be tackled (*Realisation of the costs*). Although public interest in plastics has remained, there is evidence the plastics debate is entering the *declining interest* and *post-problem* stages of the issue-attention cycle. This poses serious challenges for those working to tackle plastic pollution.

While traditional media provided a catalyst for the 'alarmed discovery' of plastics, social media has provided an important platform for accessing news and information in ways that have helped to prolong public engagement. This has helped to bring the scale of the problem to previously less engaged audiences and improve their environmental literacy. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have supported the dissemination of compelling imagery and citizen science data on the effects of plastics on wildlife. Interactive tools such as tweets and comment threads have also stimulated debate.

Social media can be described as an amplifier of concerns that acts as a debating chamber for opinions and solutions, helping to magnify and prolong debates that originated in traditional media. Advocacy campaigns on social media offer a greater range of opinions and advice on options for behaviour change that can encourage community initiatives and political activism. However, social media is often subject to less journalistic rigour on impartiality and accuracy and there is a greater tendency for content to elicit negative emotions, cause misperceptions and entrench divisions.

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### The issue

Finding solutions to plastics pollution requires sustained public engagement with the issue at the local, national and international levels. Once public interest begins to wane during the issue-attention cycle's declining interest and

twilight stages, a key question for advocacy groups and policymakers is how to maintain public attention for long enough to generate sufficient pressure for effective change and policy-making.

## Public understanding

Opinions differ on the extent to which heightened media coverage of the causes of plastics pollution impacts on public understanding. Traditional media reporting of environmental issues is typically influenced by the way editors, journalists and news outlets shape media content in order to increase their newsworthiness. Journalists use tools such as *personalisation* (where news value stems from human interest rather than systematic analysis of causes and consequences), *dramatisation* (reporting in exciting or controversial ways but omitting complex scientific or political information), *novelty* (emphasising saleable drama over chronic and previously discussed problems with less news value) and *balanced reporting* (giving both sides equal attention on controversial issues regardless of whether the balance of evidence supports one view or another).

Critics argue that these approaches to reporting can highlight segments of the plastics issue but neglect the technical, scientific, economic, social and political dimensions of the problem. Pressure on column inches and readership attention spans in particular can mean

that stories do not cover all the salient points needed to support effective responses. Simpler – or simplified – narratives about plastics pollution make information accessible to a broader readership and create high points of public awareness that increase pressure on consumers and businesses to reduce plastic usage and improve waste management. The problem with simplified narratives is that they can detract attention from important issues such as the longevity of plastics or the presence of toxic chemicals in food packaging. Debates about how plastics are produced and used, how they affect ecological systems and human health, and how plastics are governed may also remain underexplored.

Opportunities for more comprehensive debate about the deeper changes in behaviour, consumption and economic systems to address plastic use are missed when media coverage suggests there are quick fixes to the problem. Biases in the reporting on plastic pollution increases the likelihood of society adopting maladaptive responses that focus on marginal issues rather than root causes.

## Case study: plastic bag charges in the UK

The introduction of mandatory single-use plastic bag charges in England in 2015 led to a 90% reduction in purchases of single-use plastic bags. Analysis of the risks of this policy, based partly on the results of charges introduced earlier in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, informed analysis of the economic impact and public acceptance of bag charges. It also helped soften resistance from retailers.

Public support for bag charges grew rapidly after their introduction. Mentions of plastics in Parliament intensified in 2017, following the Blue Planet II series, contributing to increased policy activity to address the use of plastic straws as well as micro-beads in cosmetic products. It is likely there will be greater support for future charges to reduce plastic waste, demonstrating the potential for attention peaks to produce long-term policy initiatives to change behaviour.



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## Plastics pollution and policy-making

At a national level, spikes in media attention have played a part in driving political action. Between 1980 and 2015 plastics were rarely mentioned in the UK parliament except for small peaks in activity in 2003 and 2008 linked to packaging, recycling and waste produced by supermarkets. Mentions of plastics intensified in 2017 following the Blue Planet II series. Political solutions are, however, hampered by time lags in policy-making processes. In April 2022 a tax of £200 per tonne on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content was introduced in the UK for businesses manufacturing or importing 10 tonnes or more of plastic packaging. This law originated from a call for evidence five years earlier on using the tax system to tackle single-use plastics. In addition, the Covid pandemic led to delays implementing plastics legislation in many countries.

## Addressing the issue: sustaining public engagement

Local campaigns to promote engagement and local governance responses offer the potential to generate “mini” attention cycles on aspects of plastic pollution relevant to specific areas. They also present opportunities for learning about policy design and can become test beds for pilot policies and programmes. The downside is that localised campaigns can lack strategic direction or lull the public into thinking plastics pollution has been solved. Local government and other actors may also be constrained by legal and financial restrictions, while a lack of evidence that local initiatives are effective can dampen demand for further action. The selective nature of plastics coverage can also overlook the broad range of applications for plastics and the many routes through which plastics pollute the environment. Media coverage of poster-child issues, whilst encouraging regulation, can be less effective in encouraging comprehensive action.

Attention spikes can also act as catalysts for the introduction of flagship measures and policies. To achieve long-term impact, such initiatives need to gain sufficient momentum to withstand the ‘realisation of costs’ and

The frequency with which media coverage of plastics was referred to during parliamentary debates indicates that public pressure can encourage change. It can also influence business behaviour as retailers are increasingly being called upon to take greater responsibility for reducing and avoiding plastic packaging as a result of consumer pressures caused by media coverage. However, sporadic and unclear media stories can result in piecemeal initiatives and backsliding, it can be easy for businesses to backslide on commitments as media and public attention fades.

‘declining interest’ phases of the cycle. Concentrating policy activity too much within short-lived windows of public attention increases the risk of poorly-designed and disjointed measures, especially if media and public debate becomes fragmented and emotionally charged. Short-term measures need to be balanced against the need for comprehensive action to stem the flow of plastics into marine and terrestrial environments.

Although protecting institutional processes from fluxes in public attention can create stabler conditions for dialogue and policy development, public pressure generated by media coverage can inject greater urgency into international processes. At the 2021 G7 Summit in Cornwall protestors and campaigners petitioned delegates to intensify action on plastic pollution. Whether or not G7 delegates responded directly to the petition, the post-summit communiqué indicated support for working through the UN Environment Assembly to strengthen existing instruments and create a new international agreement to address marine plastics.

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## Securing attention and using issue-attention cycles strategically

Creating new surges in attention is a major challenge for those advocating action on issues such as plastics pollution. Existing messages can quickly become jaded. Whilst images of beaches polluted by familiar plastic objects can convey strong symbolic meanings, it is also easy for audiences to become desensitised and experience attention fatigue. New ways of generating interest and engagement are needed to extend and broaden concern in such situations.

Reframing issues and policy responses in ways that reflect current political and societal priorities can help to counteract this. Concern has grown about disposable face masks and other Personal Protective Equipment during the Covid pandemic. Embedding the plastics issue into current discourses, such as the post-Covid “build back better” narratives or emphasising the economic, social and health co-benefits of adopting circular economy approaches to plastics, may also help to renew impetus for action.

## Importance of an integrated approach

The challenges of synchronising media and public attention across different scales and places are considerable but must be overcome to maintain public pressure to strengthen the governance of plastics pollution. Peaks in public and media attention can stimulate durable and collective policy responses where it encourages politicians, policymakers, scientific experts, businesses and communities to discuss solutions collectively. One example of this is the UK Plastics Pact. Launched in April 2018, the Pact brings together businesses representing the entire plastics value chain, government and NGOs to tackle plastic waste. The consumer organisation, Which?, noted the impact of the pact’s work in encouraging deeper commitments to reduce plastic packaging and offer reusable, recyclable or compostable packaging.

Another way to sharpen public enthusiasm for action is by framing plastics as an inherently dangerous pollutant, rather than as harmless litter that can be remedied through clean-up campaigns. Although most health studies on plastics show the presence of plastic particles in different environments, they often lack detailed evaluation of the hazards they pose to human health. Diverse framings that capture the full range of ecological and human problems caused by plastics may also prolong public attention. Commissioning high-profile scientific reports and research have also been shown to be effective in generating publicity, challenging perceptions of environmental problems, and invigorating debate. The Stern Review on The Economics of Climate Change (Stern, 2006) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C (2018) both helped to re-energise discussions on climate policy.

Some commentators have advocated the establishment of a Plastics Stewardship Council, building on the reputation of forest and marine accreditation schemes, as a way of promoting industry collaboration and knowledge-sharing on circular economy approaches to plastics. Creating the operational infrastructure for a plastics certification scheme would require long-term commitments from governments, business and NGOs. Whilst such cooperation would need to extend beyond high points in attention, the UK’s Plastics Pact indicates how peaks in attention can help to initiate more structured approaches to plastics production and management.

## Conclusion

Efforts to manage environmental problems are recognised to be susceptible to the fluctuations of the issue-attention cycle. Increased media coverage of plastics pollution since 2017 has encouraged greater public engagement and helped to generate renewed pressure for policy responses. However, some approaches to media reporting on plastics pollution raises questions about the longevity and coherence of this pressure and its ability to produce

policy change. Greater understanding of how issue-attention cycles operate can provide important insights on how public attention can be maintained and losses of attention managed. Improving understanding of how issue-attention cycles affect the governance of plastics and other environmental problems must be regarded as an essential part of developing effective and lasting solutions to these problems.



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**Professor Ian Bailey** is Professor of Environmental Politics in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (Faculty of Science and Engineering).

His research and teaching interests span climate and environmental politics and sustainability, the social dimensions of renewable energy, the green economy, education for sustainable development, waste management, and societal engagement with marine environments. He teaches undergraduate and postgraduate modules on Sustainable Futures, Environmental Politics and Governance, Global Environmental Solutions, and Sustainability: Science, Governance and Society.

He has conducted funded research on the politics of carbon markets, political strategising in national and international climate politics, and

smart eco-cities. He is currently involved in projects on policy diffusion, emissions trading schemes and national climate change acts with the Fridtjof Nansens Institute, Oslo and the INTERREG project, Intelligent Community Energy project with Exeter University and other partners.

*The University of Plymouth has a national and international track record in specific areas of data acquisition as well as the interpretation and visualisation of environmental data. It is currently working draw these strengths together to deliver the next generation of environmental monitoring and assessment. Building on research bases within environmental monitoring and fate, sensors, agri-tech, and biology we have formed a University-wide Sensors group, which is already forging new collaborations and gaining funding.*