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Moulding and Manipulating the News

Sharon Beder

The media are accused of bias by people from both ends of the political spectrum, but journalists, editors and owners maintain that they provide an objective source of news. This chapter will consider the ways in which the news is shaped and how this in turn influences the way environmental issues are reported and constructed in the mass media.

In the United States, where the debate over media objectivity is most heated, conservatives criticise the media for having a 'liberal' bias and these critics focus on the personal views of journalists, editors and media owners who, they argue, tend to be elitist, left-leaning and politically correct. A number of books have been published recently highlighting this supposed liberal bias including *Press Bias and Politics: How the media frame controversial issues* (Kuypers 2002), *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (Goldberg 2003b) and *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite* (Goldberg 2003a). Goldberg argues that 'the majority of journalists in big newsrooms slant leftward in their personal politics, especially on issues like abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, and gun control; and so in their professional role they tend to assume those positions are reasonable and morally correct. Bias in the news stems from *that ...*' (Goldberg 2003a: 4).

Accusations of liberal bias, however are not new. Richard Nixon and his vice-president Spiro Agnew repeatedly referred to the bias of the media, particularly with regard to the Nixon Administration, and Agnew called journalists 'pointy-headed intellectuals' (West 2001: 65). Corporate executives and conservative leaders attributed the surge of regulation and the distrust of business of the late 1960s and early 1970s in part to the media and what they perceived as the media's liberal bias. As part of the political resurgence of conservative ideas they sought to build their own reliable media outlets and to have more influence over existing media organisations.

Robert Parry, author of *Fooling America*, describes a well-financed plan to build a conservative press in the United States: 'It ranges from nationwide radio talkshows ... to dozens of attack magazines, newspapers, newsletters and right-wing opinion columns, to national cable television networks propagating hard-line conservative values and viewpoints, to documentary producers who specialize in slick character assassination, to mega-buck publishing houses' (Parry 1995: 6).

Most conservative organisations produced their own publications or media programs. Corporate-funded think-tanks and public relations firms recruited journalists from the mainstream media to their own staffs. Conservative student newspapers were financed, as were conservative television programs such as Milton Friedman's series *Free to Choose* which was broadcast on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). So much oil company money went into sponsoring PBS programs that it was nicknamed the Petroleum Broadcasting Service (Saloma 1984: 107).

The 'liberals' themselves accuse the media of a conservative bias but focus more on institutional factors rather than individual biases. Recent examples include *What Liberal Media? The truth about bias and the news* (Alterman 2003); *Censored 2001: 25 years of censored news and the top censored stories of the year* (Phillips, et al. 2001), whose authors publish the top stories that are *not* reported by the mass media each year, and the latest edition of *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media* (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Herman & Chomsky (2002: 2) developed a 'propaganda model' of the mass media in the United States by 'tracing the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public.' They argue that news is subject to a number of filters which include media owners and advertisers and news sources (Herman and Chomsky 2002: 2).

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES

The concentration of media ownership into the hands of a few people is of concern to people at both ends of the political spectrum. For example, Rupert Murdoch controls more than half the newspapers in Australia, including the only major daily newspaper in Brisbane, Adelaide and many regional cities, and is lobbying for changes to Australian media ownership laws to enable him to buy a television network (Lawson 2003).

A pattern of media concentration in Australia is now found in many parts of the world including Britain, Europe, Canada and the United States ('Issue Guides: Media Concentration' 2003). The trend in media ownership is not only towards concentration within countries but also towards the creation of 'global media empires' that include newspapers, television stations, magazines, movie studios and publishing houses. For example, Murdoch also owns three of Britain's largest daily national newspapers and two of its largest circulation Sunday papers and controls extensive satellite broadcasting in dozens of countries. Murdoch's media empire also includes book publishing companies in Australia and the United States, Festival Records, and 20th Century Fox, as well as interests in computer software, offshore oil and gas and air transport (Abramsky 1995). According to journalist Sasha Abramsky, Murdoch 'has – and uses – the power to make' and break politicians and his papers 'have consistently opposed the peace movement, trade unions, progressive social programs ... while supporting the death penalty, lower taxes at any cost and hawkish foreign policies' (Abramsky 1995: 16-7).

The mechanism of control generally exercised by media proprietors is through the appointment of editors, 'who become the proprietor's "voice" within the newsroom, ensuring that journalistic "independence" conforms to the preferred editorial line' (McNair 1994: 42). The power of the media is not just in its editorial line but also in covering some issues rather than others, some views but not others. It is this power that makes politicians so reluctant to cross the large media moguls and regulate the industry in the public interest. So while politicians would like to regulate against concentration of media ownership they are not as tough as they would like to be on this score.

For liberal critics of the media, however, the business orientation of media owners

and their relationship with other businesses is just as much a problem for media independence as the concentration of ownership in a few hands. Most media organisations are owned by multinational multi-billion dollar corporations that are involved in a number of businesses apart from the media, such as forestry, pulp and paper mills, defence, real estate, oil wells, agriculture, steel production, railways, water and power utilities (Kellner 1990: 82). Such conglomerates not only create potential conflicts of interest in reporting the news but ensure that the makers of the news take a corporate view.

The boards of these media companies typically include representatives of international banks, multinational oil companies, car manufacturers and other corporations. Noam Chomsky, who has documented a number of biases in the US media's treatment of foreign affairs, points out that media corporations 'are closely integrated with even larger conglomerates' and so it 'would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product' (Chomsky 1989: 8).

The owners of the media influence the selection, shaping and framing of the news to attract advertisers – 'Proprietors determine the target audience and general editorial approach to that audience' (Windschuttle 1988: 264) – but also to ensure a favourable political climate for their media and other business concerns.

Commercial television and radio stations tend to get all their income from advertisers and newspapers are increasingly dependent on advertising. Tens of billions of dollars are spent every year just on television advertising and the media does its best to create a media product that suits those advertisers. While audiences may consider the advertisements as an unwelcome interruption to their news and entertainment, in reality that news and entertainment is a way of attracting people to the medium so they will be exposed to the advertisements – a way of delivering audiences for advertisers (Parenti 1986: 62).

The influence of corporate advertisers on media content is both indirect, in that the media shape content to attract an audience that will suit its advertisers, and direct in that media outlets edit material that is likely to offend advertisers, especially with news stories (Franklin 1994: 43). Sometimes advertisers directly demand influence as when one told *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report* that it would give all its advertising to the magazine that gave the most favourable coverage to its industry (cited in Kilbourne 2000: 50). However, advertisers are not usually as blatantly upfront as that (see Jackson, et al. 2003).

Corporations can also use sponsorship, a more indirect form of advertising, to influence the content of the media:

Prospective shows are often discussed with major advertisers, who review script treatments and suggest changes when necessary. Adjustments are sometimes made to please sponsors ... Corporate sponsors figure they are entitled to call the shots since they foot the bill – an assumption shared by network executives, who quickly learn to internalise the desires of their well-endowed patrons. (Lee and Solomon 1990: 60-1)

Large corporations that tend to sponsor newscasts and run green advertising campaigns were almost never examined for their environmental record (Letto 1995:

22).

KEY DEBATES

JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY

Journalists often claim that their own biases, and the pressures from advertisers and media owners, do not affect their work because of their professional norm of 'objectivity'. But the journalistic norm of objectivity is not the same as truth. It has three components. The first is 'depersonalisation', which means that journalists should not overtly express their own views, evaluations, or beliefs. The second is 'balance', which involves presenting the views of representatives of both sides of a controversy without favouring one side (Entman 1989: 30). And the third is 'accuracy', which requires journalists to quote people and relay 'facts' from sources accurately. And there associated conventions:

authoritative sources, such as politicians must be quoted (in this way the journalist is seen to distance him- or herself from the views reported, by establishing that they are someone else's opinions); 'fact' must be separated from 'opinion', and 'hard news' from 'editorial comment'; and the presentation of information must be structured pyramidically, with the most important bits coming first, at the 'top' of the story. (McNair 1994: 47)

These conventions perpetuate the impression that reporters are simply conveying the 'facts' and not trying to influence how people interpret them. The ideal of objectivity gives journalists legitimacy as independent and credible sources of information.

The rhetoric of journalistic objectivity supplies a mask for the inevitable subjectivity that is involved in news reporting and is supposed to reassure audiences who might otherwise be wary of the power of the media. It also ensures a certain degree of autonomy to journalists and freedom from regulation to media corporations (Entman 1989: 32; Nelkin 1987: 94). However, news reporting involves judgements about what is a good story, who will be interviewed for it, what questions will be asked, which parts of those interviews will be printed or broadcast, what facts are relevant and how the story is written:

value judgements infuse everything in the news media ... Which of the infinite observations confronting the reporter will be ignored? Which of the facts noted will be included in the story? Which of the reported events will become the first paragraph? Which story will be prominently displayed on page 1 and which buried inside or discarded? ... Mass media not only report the news – they also literally *make* the news. (Lee and Solomon 1990: 16)

Journalists are free to write what they like if they produce well-written stories 'free of any politically discordant tones', that is, if what they write fits the ideology of those above them in the hierarchy. A story that supports the status quo is generally considered to be neutral and its objectivity is not questioned, while one that challenges the status quo tends to be perceived as having a 'point of view' and therefore biased. Statements and assumptions that support the existing power structure are regarded as 'facts', while those that are critical of it tend to be rejected as 'opinions' (Parenti 1986: 35, 50). For example, one study of environmental stories found that 'while

the media were willing to dispute dire environmental predictions, they were more accepting of dire economic projections – citing enormous anticipated job losses while rarely asking how the figures were derived, or if plant closings and layoffs were the only options’ (Spencer 1992: 15).

Objectivity in journalism has nothing to do with seeking out the truth, except in so much as truth is a matter of accurately reporting what others have said. This contrasts with the concept of scientific objectivity where views are supposed to be verified with empirical evidence in a search for the truth (Nelkin 1987: 96). Ironically, journalistic objectivity discourages a search for evidence; the balancing of opinions often replaces journalistic investigation altogether. A survey of environmental reporting by media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found that it tended to be ‘limited to discussion of clashing opinions, rather than facts gathered by the reporters themselves’ (Spencer 1992: 13).

NEWS SOURCES

The news is shaped by the choice of people journalists interview for research, quotes and on-air appearances. The conventions of objectivity, depersonalisation and balance tend to transform the news into a series of quotes and comments from a remarkably small number of sources. Most journalists tend to use, as sources, people from the mainstream establishment, whom they believe have more credibility with their audience. Highly placed government and corporate spokespeople are the safest and easiest sources in terms of giving stories legitimacy (Entman 1989: 18). When environmentalists are used as sources they tend to be leaders of the ‘mainstream’ environmental groups that are seen as more moderate (Spencer 1992: 17). Those without power, prestige and position have difficulty establishing their credibility as a source of news and tend to be marginalised (McNair 1994: 48).

Journalists who have access to highly placed government and corporate sources have to keep them on side by not reporting anything adverse about them or their organisations. Otherwise they risk losing them as sources of information. In return for this loyalty, their sources occasionally give them good stories, leaks and access to special interviews. Unofficial information, or leaks, give the impression of investigative journalism, but are often strategic manoeuvres on the part of those with position or power (Ricci 1993: 99). ‘It is a bitter irony of source journalism ... that the most esteemed journalists are precisely the most servile. For it is by making themselves useful to the powerful that they gain access to the “best” sources’ (quoted in Lee and Solomon 1990: 18).

Balance means ensuring that statements by those challenging the establishment are balanced with statements by those whom they are criticising, though not necessarily the other way round (Parenti 1986: 52). For example, despite claims of anti-nuclear media bias by the nuclear industry, a FAIR study of news clippings collected by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission over a five-month period found that no news articles cited anti-nuclear views without also citing a pro-nuclear response, whereas 27 per cent of articles cited only pro-nuclear views (Grossman 1992).

Balance means getting opinions from both sides (where the journalist recognises two sides) but not necessarily covering the spectrum of opinion. More radical opinions

are generally left out. Government environmental authorities can be used as an environmental source in one story and as an anti-environmentalist source in another. Nor are opposing opinions always treated equally in terms of space, positioning and framing (Parenti 1986: 218; Spencer 1992: 17). Balance does not guarantee neutrality even when sources are treated fairly, since the choice of balancing sources can be distorted. FAIR gives the example of a *Nightline* show where radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh argued that volcanoes are the major cause of ozone depletion. Limbaugh was 'balanced' with then Senator Al Gore 'who argued that the answer to ecological problems was more "capitalism"' (Spencer 1992: 18).

'In practice objectivity means journalists have to interview legitimate elites on all major sides of a dispute' and this gives powerful people guaranteed access to the media no matter how flimsy their argument or how transparently self-interested. In their attempts to be balanced on a scientific story, journalists may use any opposing view 'no matter how little credence it may get from the larger scientific community' (Entman 1989: 37-8; Jim Naureckas, editor of *Extra!* quoted in Ruben 1994). But giving equal treatment to two sides of an argument can often give a misleading impression. Phil Shabecoff, former environment reporter for the *New York Times*, gives the example of views on climate change:

the findings of the International Panel on Climate Change – a body of some 200 eminent scientists named by the World Meteorological Organization of the United Nations Environment Program – is generally considered to be the consensus position. But I have seen a number of stories where its conclusions are given equal or less weight than those of a single scientist who has done little or no significant peer-review research in the field, is rarely, if ever, cited on those issues in the scientific literature, and whose publication is funded by a fossil-fuel industry group with an obvious axe to grind ... For a reporter, at this stage of the debate, to give equal or even more weight to that lonely scientist with suspect credentials is, in my view, taking sides in the debate. (Shabecoff 1994: 42)

Paul Rauber gives another example of how equal treatment can give a misleading impression: 'Hundreds, maybe thousands of people gather to call for the factory to stop polluting or for the clearcutting to end. In one little corner, half a dozen loggers or millworkers hold a counter-demonstration on company time. That night on the evening news, both sides get equal coverage' (Rauber 1996: 20).

Journalists who accurately report what their sources say can effectively remove responsibility for their stories onto their sources. The ideal of objectivity therefore encourages uncritical reporting of official statements and those of authority figures. In this way the biases of individual journalists are avoided but institutional biases are reinforced (Ryan 1991: 10,176). 'Professional codes ensure that what is considered important is that which is said and done by important people. And important people are people in power. Television news thus privileges holders of power' (Kellner 1990: 113-4).

FRONT GROUPS AND THINK-TANKS

Powerful corporations are not only represented in the media by corporate spokespeople but they also seek to multiply their voice by funding others to speak for them as well.

A major focus of the new corporate activism, which has been a response to the perceived liberal bias of journalists, has been to ensure that corporate-funded people are the ones that the media turn to for comment, be they scientists, think-tank 'experts' or front group spokespeople.

The use of front groups enable corporations to take part in public debates in the media behind a cover of community concern. When a corporation wants to oppose environmental regulations or support an environmentally damaging development it may do so openly and in its own name. But it is far more effective to have a group of citizen's or a group of experts – preferably a coalition of such groups – which can publicly promote the outcomes desired by the corporation while claiming to represent the public interest. When such groups do not already exist, the modern corporation can pay a public relations firm to create them.

Merrill Rose, executive vice-president of the public relations firm Porter/Novelli, advises companies:

Put your words in someone else's mouth ... There will be times when the position you advocate, no matter how well framed and supported, will not be accepted by the public simply because you are who you are. Any institution with a vested commercial interest in the outcome of an issue has a natural credibility barrier to overcome with the public, and often, with the media. (Rose 1991)

Corporate front groups often portray themselves as environmentalists. In this way corporate interests appear to have environmental support. The names of these groups are chosen because they sound as if they are grassroots community and environmental groups. The Forest Protection Society in Australia, for example, was established in 1987 with the support of the Forest Industry Campaign Association (Rowell 1996: 240). It shared the same postal address as the National Association of Forest Industries and its fact sheets promote logging in rainforests as 'one of the best ways to ensure that the rain-forests are not destroyed' (Burton 1994: 17-18). (In 2000 it came out of the closet and renamed itself Timber Communities Australia [<http://www.tca.org.au/TCAIndex.htm>].)

Corporate front groups may also portray themselves as independent scientific groups whose aim is to cast doubt on the severity of the problems associated with environmental deterioration and create confusion by magnifying uncertainties and showing that some scientists dispute the claims of the scientific community. For example groups funded by the fossil-fuel industry emphasise the uncertainty associated with global warming predictions (Beder 2002b: ch 14).

Another strategy used by corporate front groups is to recognise environmental problems caused by corporations but to promote superficial solutions that prevent and pre-empt the sorts of changes that are really necessary to solve the problem. Sometimes they shift the blame from corporations to the individual citizen. For example, the Keep America Beautiful Campaign focuses on anti-litter campaigns but ignores the potential of recycling legislation and changes to packaging. It seeks to attribute litter and waste disposal problems to individual's acting irresponsibly and admits no corporate responsibility for the problem (Beder 2002b: ch 14).

The media often use these front groups as sources of information and quote their

spokespeople without realising their corporate origins or acknowledging in their news reporting the corporate connections of the groups. The same is true for think-tanks, which are overwhelmingly funded by corporations and wealthy corporate-aligned foundations. Various studies by FAIR have found that conservative and centrist think-tank experts are used as news sources many times more often than experts from progressive or left-leaning think-tanks (Dolny 2000). These think-tanks are cited without any indication of their ideological basis or funding sources and their personnel are treated as independent experts (Solomon 1996: 10).

The increasing trend for corporations to use front groups and friendly scientists as their mouthpieces has distorted media reporting on environmental issues since the media often do not differentiate between corporate front groups and genuine citizen groups, and industry-funded scientists are often treated as independent scientists. Because of the myth of scientific objectivity journalists tend to have an uncritical trust in scientists (Nelkin 1987: 105) and few 'question the motivation[s] of the scientists whose research is quoted, rarely attributing a study's funding source or institution's political slant' (Ruben 1994: 11). Nor do the mainstream media generally cover the phenomenon of front groups and think-tanks and artificially generated grassroots campaigns, which would serve to undermine their operation by exposing the deceit on which they depend.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Much of the news people read or watch on television is manufactured by PR firms and specialists, rather than discovered by journalists. Media and press releases include news, feature stories, bulletins, media advisories and announcements, all of which flood media offices. Their purpose is to develop and maintain public goodwill for the organisation sending them as well as favourable government policies. Most journalists rely on these sources to supply the 'raw material of their craft, regular, reliable and useable information' (Walters and Walters 1992: 33). This flow of 'free' information saves the journalist time and effort finding stories to write about. Yet it is very difficult for the public to be able to distinguish real news from news generated by public relations.

Often news stories are copied straight from news releases; at other times they are rephrased and sometimes they are augmented with additional material. This practice does not vary much between large and small papers as larger papers need more stories and smaller papers have fewer staff to write their stories. According to various studies, press releases are the basis for 40–50 per cent of the news content of US newspapers (Blyskal and Blyskal 1985: 28; Carlisle 1993: 22; Lee and Solomon 1990: 66; Walters and Walters 1992: 33).

The reliance of journalists on sources such as PR personnel and government officials is referred to as 'source journalism'. By providing the news feedstock, they cause reporters to react rather than initiate. Journalists who are fed news stories are less likely to go looking for their own stories, which could bring negative publicity. In this way source journalism displaces investigative reporting.

By being the primary source of a journalist's information on a particular story, PR people can influence the way the story is told and who tells it. Jeff and Marie Blyskal in their book *PR: How the Public Relations Industry Writes the News* explain:

Good PR is rather like the placement of a fish-eye lens in front of the reporter. The facts the PR man wants the reporter to see front and center through the lens appear bigger than normal. Other facts, perhaps opposing ones, are pushed to the side by the PR fish-eye lens and appear crowded together, confused, obscured. The reporter's entire field of vision is distorted by the PR lens. (Blyskal and Blyskal 1985: 69)

Public relations is a multi-billion dollar industry. In 2000, the top twenty-five public relations companies received over \$3600 million in revenues and in the US alone employed over 200 000 people (Holmes Report 2001). One of the fastest growing areas of public relations is environmental public relations, or 'greenwash' as environmentalists call it. Between 1990 and 1995 the amount that US firms were spending each year on public relations advice on how to green their own image and deal with environmental opposition doubled to about \$1 billion per year (Bleifuss 1995: 4-9; Stauber and Rampton 1995: 173). Today most of the top PR firms include environmental PR as one of their specialities.

One of the ways PR experts enhance the image of their clients and show that they care is by emphasising and publicising their positive actions, no matter how trivial, and downplaying any negative aspects, no matter how significant. According to Robert Gray, former chairman of PR giant Hill & Knowlton, 'our job is not to make white black or to cover the truth, but to tell the positive side regardless of who the client is' (quoted in Roschwalb 1994: 270). Sometimes this involves putting a positive spin or interpretation on the available information:

Did this year's fines levied by the Environmental Protection Agency (or the state equivalent) drop to 'only' \$5 million? Then celebrate the company's 'continued positive trend in compliance.' Was there no improvement from last year's release of toxic chemicals? Then report on the 'levelling off of emissions.' (Makower 1996)

For example, in March 1999 BP launched its 'Plug in the Sun' program based on its investment in solar energy and the installation of solar panels on petrol stations around the world. In its advertisements it said, 'We can fill you up by sunshine' although it was still petrol people were putting in their cars. In 2000 it rebranded itself as 'bp, beyond petroleum'. But bp remains committed to ever increasing production and usage of oil and gas and it spent more on its rebranding than it did on solar energy (quoted in Beder 2002a).

NEWS STYLE

Environmental problems are poorly reported in the media because of the need to provide entertainment rather than political awareness, to attract audiences for advertisers, even in news and current affairs programs. This occasionally affects a specific item of news but more generally affects the sorts of stories that are covered and the way they are covered. News editors are reluctant to deal with controversial political and social issues that might alienate potential consumers. As a result news has become bland and neutral and ignores issues that concern large portions of the population who are not considered to have or exercise much buying power (Bagdikian 1983: 180-1, 201-2).

Yet bland news can be boring so the lack of controversy and social significance is made up for by making the news entertaining and interesting. Intellectual and political interest is replaced by 'human interest', conflict, novelty, emotion and drama or as one feature writer put it 'currency, celebrity, proximity, impact and oddity' – the elements of newsworthiness (Ryan 1991: 31).

Entertainment merged with current affairs produces 'infotainment' which, as Philip Gold notes in the conservative magazine *Insight on the News*, blends 'trivial amusement with the address of serious issues', reduces 'serious reportage into fragmented coverage of the latest "shocking developments"' and squeezes out 'more serious discourse' (Gold 1994: 37-8). Television news producers prefer very short stories with good visuals and action stories that add excitement to the news. They are very good at providing drama and emotion but poor at giving in-depth information on complex issues. News stories are presented very quickly, in rapid succession and with little explanation. As a result, people who rely on television to get their news tend to be 'the least-informed members of the public' (Levy 1992: 70).

The need to entertain turns social processes and events into stories. Stories that take longer than a day to unfold are told as a series of climaxes (Windschuttle 1988:268). Says one editor: 'Acid rain, hazardous waste ... they're the kind of big bureaucratic stories that make people's eyes glaze over. There's no clear solution, no clear impact. They're not sexy' (quoted in Ryan 1991: 31). The news 'is characteristically about events rather than processes, and effects rather than causes' (McNair 1994: 46). As a result environmental reporting tends to concentrate on events such as the Earth Summit or various Earth Days, accidents, disasters such as oil tanker spills, and official announcements (Spencer 1991: 13) and avoids background information on context and structural causes.

News stories are told as 'self-contained, isolated happenings' (Gamson, et al. 1992: 387). Reporting of environmental problems tends to be superficial, narrowing the focus to specific events in isolation rather than looking at systemic problems that caused them such as the international monetary system or the unregulated power of corporations, and concentrating on the costs of environmental measures (Lee and Solomon 1990: 202, 222). Environmental problems become a series of events that emphasise individual action rather than social forces and issues.

Each story competes for priority and an emphasis on 'breaking news' does not encourage any coverage of long-term issues. This means journalists have to work to very tight deadlines and don't have the time to investigate properly and consult a wide range of sources.

The journalistic tendency to balance stories with two opposing views leads to a tendency to 'build stories around a confrontation between protagonists and antagonists'(Ricci 1993: 95). Issues such as garbage and sewage sludge only get coverage, despite their importance, when there is a fight over the siting of a landfill or incinerator and then the coverage is on the 'anger and anguish of affected citizens, or the conflicting claims of corporate spokesmen, government regulators and environmental activists' rather than the issues and technical background to them (Gersh 1992: 16).

The environmental movement relies extensively on the mass media to get its

message across to the general public, but doing so has its costs. The media tend to present images and style, not meaning and content. Protest actions and events are described as theatre spectacles rather than as 'part of a democratic struggle over vital issues' (Parenti 1986: 99). In his analysis of how the media treated the New Left student movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Todd Gitlin observed:

In the late twentieth century, political movements feel called upon to rely on large-scale communications in order to *matter*, to say who they are and what they intend to publics they want to sway; but in the process they become 'newsworthy' only by submitting to the implicit rules of newsmaking, by conforming to journalistic notions (themselves embedded in history) of what a 'story' is, what an 'event' is, what a 'protest' is. The processed image then tends to become 'the movement' for wider publics. (Gitlin 1980: 3)

In many news stories about local controversies the intelligence and research of local residents is downplayed and they are presented as passionate, self-interested and inexpert. This tends to discourage wider support for their cause from the viewing public and to disempower other citizens by depriving them of attractive models of political activism.

Current affairs programs do expose corporate misdeeds, accidents and environmental and health problems resulting from unsafe products and production processes but in a way that does not call into question 'fundamental political or economic structures and institutions' (Kellner 1990: 107-8).

By treating business wrongdoings as isolated deviations from the socially beneficial system of 'responsible capitalism', the media overlook the systemic features that produce such abuses and the regularity with which they occur. Business 'abuse' is presented in the national press as an occasional aberration, rather than as a predictable and common outcome of corporate power and the business system. (Parenti 1986: 110-1)

Environmental disasters are not followed up and environmental revelations that are uncovered by journalists are 'seldom incorporated into the body of knowledge and perspective' that environmental journalists draw on in their work (Spencer 1992: 13).

The environmental movement is often characterised in the media as 'just another special-interest group' looking after its own 'economic and institutional well-being' rather than a 'broad-based social movement' (Shabecoff 1994: 43). The more radical environmental groups are sometimes treated as fringe loonies.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The shaping of the news is a well understood area despite the existence of differing views on the significance and impact of news filters such as journalists, media owners, advertisers and news sources. The implications of these filters for the reporting of environmental news stories can readily be deduced. But the wider implications for environmentalists seeking to change perceptions of environmental problems and encourage action to be taken to solve them is an area that requires further research and discussion.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does concentration of media ownership matter? Does it affect environmental news coverage?
2. Do advertisers influence news content? In what way might this affect how environmental issues are covered in the news?
3. How objective can news reporters be? Is a concern for the environment objective?
4. How do journalists find their news sources? How would an environmental group go about becoming a news source?
5. How can you differentiate between a front group, and a genuine community-based environmental group?
6. What is wrong with source journalism? Why do environmentalists prefer investigative reporting?
7. Why does it matter if television stations try to make the news entertaining? How does it influence the reporting of environmental issues?
8. What are the filters that an issue or event has to pass through to become a news story? Which filters are most significant for environmental reporting?

Glossary of Terms

Front groups: a group that purports to be independent or broadly community-based but is in fact funded or sponsored to represent a special interest.

Greenwash: an environmental adaptation of ‘whitewash’ aimed at pretending that an organisation or person cares about the environment.

Think tanks: organisations that are oriented towards propagating particular research and ideas that are in the interests of their funders – usually corporations.

News source: people whom journalists interview as part of their research or for quotes and on-air appearances.

Source journalism: journalism that relies on information provided by sources and from news releases and public relations personnel.

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