

Constraints on Environmental News Production in the U. S.: Interviews with American Journalists

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This study interviewed American environmental journalists to identify diverse forces that influence environmental newsmaking. The interview revealed that concerns for possible legal problems, perceived pressure from the advertisers, journalists' lack of scientific knowledge and technical training influence the way environmental news is produced. Specifically, the interview generated the following findings. First, journalists assume that environmental newsmaking is basically identical to general news production. Second, as a whole journalists' investigations on corporate activities are discouraged: the intensity of criticism is mitigated by the fear of their story being removed or their "getting into trouble." Third, concerns about legal disputes tend to refrain journalists from investigative reporting. Fourth, journalists' strong commitment to the professional ideology of objectivity leads them generally to define every event in terms of 'two different sides' of stories. Finally, journalists' lack of scientific knowledge and training make them heavily dependent on official sources.

Keywords: *American journalism, environmental reporting, news sociology, objectivity*

1. INTRODUCTION

"Environment" or "environmental protection" has been one of the primary concerns of American society during the last few decades. The publication of *Silent Spring* (1962) which warned the impact of pesticide on ecology served as a momentum for raising environmental consciousness by dramatically increasing public awareness of environmental pollution and its hazardous effect. In the following years, environmental protection came to be perceived as a highly visible social issue in the U. S. and the Government responded to public concern by establishing a federal bureaucracy, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and a series of pollution-related legislations (Gottlieb 1993). In 1980s, Reagan Administration's attempt to deregulate environmental laws in favor of the corporate industry created a backlash from the political elites, the public and many environmental groups. During the early Reagan years environmental protection has become a consensual issue commanding support from an overwhelming majority of the American public. In the mid-1980s, network television news began to pay regular attention to environmental issues conferring them the status of important public agenda. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, environmental issues remain on top of public agenda as the American society witness and experience numerous cases of environmental disasters and health hazards.

For majority of the American public, information about and knowledge of the environment comes from the media. Mass media are a key arena where public understanding of environment is constructed and contested. Competing environmental interest groups struggle for access to and legitimation from the media. However, journalists and editors more often than not prefer to maintain and reproduce the interest of the powerful. The media tend to prefer industry and government over the environmental groups and often times present the government's account of environmental problems as the truth. News about

environmental catastrophes, accidents and law-suits outnumber long-term environmental issues like the global warming, ozone depletion or acid rain. When dealing with environmental disasters, the media tend to focus on discrete events rather than on the contexts in which they occur, thereby giving the impression that individuals or errant corporations rather than institutional politics and business practice are responsible for those events (Smith 1992; Wilkins and Patterson 1990).

One of the reasons for such a coverage pattern can be traced to the relationship between the media and environmental claimsmakers such as the government, industry and environmental movement groups. American journalism history shows that by 1950s, the media-government relationship had become well-established and the press had become a sort of fourth branch of government (Hallin 1994). Another reason may be that those who make the news are subject to the professional norms and routines of a news organization which may influence the way a topic is selected and packaged.

The effect of established work routines and professional ideology on news production is a well-documented area in news studies. But how environmental reporters interact with organizational constraints, and how that in turn shapes a news story demands scrutiny on its own since environmental news reporting involves a unique task of understanding and interpreting complicated scientific knowledge. There is a body of literature that explored environmental news production processes. These studies identify a rather limited number of factors that influence the environmental news production. Existing research point mostly to internal factors, for instance, daily news production routines, the influence from the editors, limitation of the beat system and perceived source hierarchy as important variables that shape the form and content of environmental news. These studies tend to ignore other possible outer-organizational factors and orientation of individual reporters that could also influence environmental news making. More importantly, existing studies do not explore the process in which journalists negotiate with various pressures and cope with complicated scientific knowledge which often involve conflicts of groups with different interests.

In this context, the present study aims to further investigate various constraints within and out of the news organizations that influence the process of environmental news production. By so doing, it can contribute to expand academic understanding of environmental journalism which is now distinctive area of journalism on its own. For this purpose, this study interviewed six veteran environmental journalists from print and broadcast media.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Constraints on News Production

Why is it that the media practitioners, who work with a great deal of autonomy within institutions that proclaim the neutral goal of informing the public, systematically legitimize established views and ideas while relatively ignoring other alternatives? Existing studies of newsmaking identify different mechanisms by means of which the news construct reality in a particular direction: 1) control of journalists through professional training and reward/punishment in the newsroom (Breed 1959; Soloski 1989); 2) commercial media's pursuit for profit maximization (Garnham 1986; Golding 1981); 3) established work routines of the daily news production and professional ideology of journalism (Anderson *et al.* 1997; Erickson *eds.* 1991; Manoff and Schudson 1986; Sigal 1987; Tuchman 1978).

Training and reward/punishment system in the newsroom serve as one of the determining factors of news content. What makes the newsmakers select certain stories instead of others and place certain items in a more prominent positions is by and large the editorial policies of the newsroom. The policy is not stated explicitly anywhere, but the reporters internalize the policies and confront them through their interactions with the editors, particularly through rewards and punishment from them. For instance, if things are blue-penciled consistently, a reporter learns that his editor expects certain ideas to be treated in a particular way. Similarly, Soloski (1989) observed that the fear of being reprimanded is enough to keep most staff members in line in the newsroom. In this respect, newsroom policies function as an intra-organizational control mechanism that directs the actions of journalists. As Hannigan (1995) puts, editors are more likely to be sensitive to external pressures from corporate advertisers and other powerful supporters of the status quo. Therefore, stories that challenge the established environmental perspectives or policies are more likely to be discouraged in the newsroom.

An extended form of orientation to newsroom policies is the training to the professional norms of journalism. While the editorial policy varies from newsroom to newsroom, journalistic norms are universal to all the journalists at work. Prevailing norms of journalism guide journalists in their selection of newsworthy events and news sources. For instance, news judgments require that journalists share assumptions about what is normal in society, since an event's newsworthiness is related to its departure from what is considered to be normal. By concentrating on the deviant and the unusual, journalists implicitly support the norms and values of a society (Soloski, 1989). The dilemma of radical environmental movement groups well demonstrates this tendency. When groups with more radical environmental voices want to capture the media attention, they have to stage a dramatic stunt or protest to feed the media's appetite for something unusual. The consequence is that their political message is trivialized and delegitimized while their deviance is highlighted.

The economics of the news organizations is another important factor that determines the content of media products. The news media constantly attempt to increase the audience size by producing commodities that resonate with assumptions most familiar and most widely legitimated (Garnham 1986; Golding and Murdock 1991; Jhally 1987). Viewed from the economic perspective, the identity of news is unique: it is a commercial commodity as well as a cultural product, and the commercial imperatives dictate topic selection and presentation. Since the news has to appeal to the largest possible audience, it is sensitive to new ideas and trends in the society. In attempting to reach widespread, anonymous audiences, media draw on the most broadly held common social values and assumptions - in other words, the prevailing consensus - in establishing common ground for communication with audiences (Gitlin 1987). The consequence is that the media leave out low-power constituencies that are too small, too diffuse to be easily reached and too poor for marketing purposes. At the same time, media tend to focus on more sensational stories that involve controversies, attractive visuals and dramas. As Dunwoody and Griffin's (1993) analysis of 20-year coverage of American environmental news shows, major types of environmental events in the newspaper are the ones that involve conflicts or catastrophes.

Organizational routines have profound impact on the shape and content of news. In the daily practice of journalism, there must be routines of practice which lessen the burdens of unpredictability and make manageable the task of transmuting the events of the world into news. News is value-laden not by virtue of any intent to deceive or manipulate, but by the exigencies of routine production procedures in newsrooms and the beliefs and conventions

which support them (Golding 1981). Organizational constraints can be divided into two distinctive categories: the bureaucratic and routine constraints imposed by organizations in the process of transforming raw events into news reports (Anderson *et al.* 1997; Ericson *eds.* 1991; Sigal 1987); and epistemological constraints which is an inevitable result of employing specific methods to understand reality (Gans 1979; Fishman 1980; Molotch and Lester 1974; Manoff and Schudson 1986; Tuchman 1978).

The former group emphasizes organizational, economic and technical requirements of news production as critical in examining news products. In this approach, the routinized procedures, the organizational structure of news operations themselves, are thought to be the main elements in determining the news product as we see it. Among many facets of journalistic routines, the relationship between the media and their sources captures the most extensive attention in studies of news. This is because news can best be seen as ongoing communication among journalists and influential sources (Tuchman 1978). News making is not random; it consists of patterned activities of newsmen relying on news sources for a continuous supply of information. News organizations constantly seek efficient news sources who are legitimate and credible (Sigal 1987). Sources, according to Gans (1979), are deemed legitimate if they have been used before, if they are "productive," "reliable" "trustworthy," "authoritative" and "articulate." Therefore, being a news source means being an 'accredited knower' of the given situation. These 'authorized knowers' provide frames through which a situation is interpreted. Discourse produced by the privileged news sources is an important vehicle for justifying the authority and therefore giving legitimacy to institutions they represent (Erickson *eds.* 1991). At the same time, those who have privileged access to news as sources have the power to define what is normal and by implication deviant, what is acceptable or not, and eventually what is natural and universal. Existing research findings reveal that environmental news is dominated by official sources. For instance, McDonald's (1993) survey of over 800 articles in the mainstream US press found that, of attributed quotes, more than 50 percent was from government officials, the second largest percentage were from industry, and the lowest number of quotes, less than 4% came from environmental groups.

Compatible with these organizational constraints, but not sharply demarcated from them, is the phenomenological approach to news as a social construction of reality. What makes news the way it is, is epistemological constraints in newsmaking process. Here news is conceptualized as a form of knowledge that imposes a "frame" to define social reality. The human agency of news, the informal rules journalists adopt to process vast amounts of information and to select and repackage it in a form that audiences will accept as the news are the key forces that shape the form and content of news. Thus, for Fishman (1980), news is a determinant form of knowledge - not because the world out there already comes in determinant forms, but because people employ specific methods that strive to organize that world into something coherent. Were different methods used, different forms of news would result and the public would know the world outside their direct experience in a very different way. Existing research repeatedly demonstrate that the number of frameworks through which news construct environmental reality is significantly limited. For instance, Spencer and Trish found that media stories on environmental hazard events favour monocausal frames rather than frames involving complex causal networks. Thus, the increase in toxic pollution in drinking-water supply of New Orleans during the summer of 1988 were almost exclusively attributed to a simple natural phenomenon - a drop in water supply in the Mississippi River due to drought conditions.

2.2. Constraints on Environmental News making

Existing studies of environmental newsreporting identify a variety of factors that shape and limit the scope and tone of environmental news. Research unanimously indicate that environmental news production is, to large extent, constrained and shaped by the same production constraints which govern newswork in general: limited production periods, limited story lengths; and limited sources. Clark (1992) has grouped these production constraints into two general categories: short-term logistical and technological constraints, and long-term economic and occupational constraints which are embedded in the news process itself. Short-term pressures of time have meant that environmental issues and problems have often been framed by journalists within an event orientation. As Dunwoody and Griffin (1993) pointed out, this event orientation limits journalistic frame in two ways: 1) it allows news sources to control to the bigger environmental picture; 2) it absolves journalists from attending events to the bigger environmental picture. According to Wilkins and Patterson (1990), this event-centered reporting is characteristic not only of quick onset disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes and blizzards, but also of slow onset environmental hazards.

Environmental news coverage is influenced also by the routines of news organization in that the subject environment does not fit nicely into the structure of routine news production. Many newspapers tend to be partially organized according to fixed beats - city hall, industrial relations, crime, sports, etc. Schoenfield (1980) cites one reporter as describing the classical environmental story as a 'business-medical-scientific-economic-social-pollution story.' This being so, editors and producers often do not know what to do with stories about the environment.

The same is true with smaller newspapers and broadcast newsrooms that do not use the beat system, opting instead for a general assignment system (Friedman 1984). This creates difficulties for covering environmental issues in more comprehensive way. General assignment reporters, despite their optimism that they can quickly acquire adequate knowledge about subjects in which they have no background or training, are rarely capable of sophisticated reporting such as that demanded by many environmental stories.

Other factors that influence the environmental news coverage is the role and influence of news editors. Since the editors always are conscious of circulation or audience figures, they favour stories which feature controversy and conflict. As a result, sensationalism is always preferred over more meaningful issues. In addition, editors are more likely to be sensitive to external pressures from corporate advertisers and other powerful supporters of the status quo. Reporters internalize these tendencies through socialization process in the newsroom and occasionally modify or overlook environmental stories that are against the corporate interests (Friedman 1983).

As a whole, studies on environmental journalism indicate that journalists work with similar kinds of constraints and pressures which reporters in general are experiencing in daily work of newsmaking. Even though environment is a unique topic that involve scientific, medical, and legal knowledge, the same treatment of the topic in the newsroom lead to the same event-oriented approach that generate environmental knowledge that is in favor of the existing capitalist industrial order.

3. METHODS

In order to identify and investigate various forces that influence the making of environmental news, six journalists from different parts of the US were interviewed. (Table 1 presents profiles of each respondent.)

Table 1. Profiles of Interview Respondents

Interviewee	Affiliated Organization	Professional background
Reporter A	Minneapolis Star Tribune	17-year experience as environmental reporter and editor in various news organizations.. Member of Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ).
Reporter B	St. Paul Pioneer Press	24-year experience as environmental reporter and editor in many news organizations.
Reporter C	NBC Affiliate	11-year experience as general assignment reporter and anchor at local television stations.
Reporter D	Fox Affiliate	21-year experience as environmental reporter in the state of Louisiana, the most polluted area in the US Covered historical environmental events such as Great Louisiana Toxics March.
Reporter E	Philadelphia Inquirer	30-year experience as environmental reporter and editor in many news organizations. Knight-Ridder journalism fellow.
Reporter F	Chicago Tribune	15-year experience as environmental reporter in many different news organizations.

The journalists were selected based on the length of their work experience and accessibility. Reporter E, the founding president of Society of Environmental Journalists and journalism faculty at a state university, provided a list of reporters who have extensive experience in environmental reporting. Twenty people were contacted and six people who agreed to participate were chosen for the interview. Six journalists may not represent the experiences and opinions of all the journalists in the US. However, respondents' long-time experience as environmental reporters and their experience in many different news organizations across the nation enabled them to form informed perspectives on environmental journalism and as such, their views can provide a general picture of environmental news production in the US.

The interview process was two fold. First, e-mail interviews were conducted to provide an orientation for the later interviews. E-mail interviews introduced, in general terms, the purpose of research, the kind of questions respondents would be asked to answer. Based on the e-mail answers, telephone interviews were conducted. Questions were asked without reference to any particular issues or cases. Thus, information obtained through the interviews is pertinent to the general issues of environmental news making.

4. INTERVIEW FINDINGS

4.1. American Journalists' Perception of Environmental News

Journalists' perception of environmental news and their relationship to the environment as a distinct news category are important aspects of the news production process. This perception shared by both reporters and editors profoundly affects the way environmental stories are selected and covered. The interviews revealed three major perceptions commonly held by American environmental reporters: First, journalists as a whole are sympathetic to environmental causes. Simultaneously however, they strongly profess objectivity and neutrality as their occupational norm. They believe their personal values do not and should not influence environmental news coverage; Secondly, journalists perceive that the production of environmental news is not much different from the production of other daily news items. Accordingly, they consciously or unconsciously rely on conventional news values, story formulas, and source patterns which govern the production of general news stories; Third, journalists feel that they do not have sufficient knowledge or professional training to interpret complicated scientific data and this sometimes discourages them to further pursue intricate environmental issues. In what follows, we will examine each finding and implication more in detail.

Interviews reveal that American journalists are concerned about environmental problems and are supportive of environmental causes. According to reporter A, "[M]ost of the journalists are in the field because they care about the environment and are concerned about environment." However, respondents stress that they separate personal values from professional performance. As reporter B states, "Journalists as a group have made a real effort to not be seen as pro-environmental... we see ourselves principally as journalists and we want to write about both sides of the issues." In response to the question about whether the environmental reporter should help change public attitudes about environment, reporter A said "One's primary goal is to report the truth... if one goes into this kind of job with a fixed view of particular issues and you try and bend people to your view, you're not being a journalist, you ought to be a campaigner with Friends of the Earth or someone like that..." These statements reveal that the professional ideology of objectivity plays a key role in covering environmental stories as it does in other news topics.

In order to achieve objective reporting, journalists remain firmly committed to the notions of balance and impartiality. Reporter D, a television reporter well-known for his coverage of many pollution issues in Louisiana, emphasizes the importance of neutral approach:

I find many environmental reporters to be overly sympathetic to the environmentalist view. This is partly a function of a tendency in the media to root for the underdog. Exxon is big, therefore it is automatically wrong. There is a sort of misplaced populism, and television is inherently a populist medium. I have tried to bring a more neutral approach to my reporting, though many a company has taken issue with the conclusions drawn in some stories.

Like reporter D, interview respondents repeatedly emphasize that they take a neutral approach to the issue. However, their notion of neutrality is rather limited. They perceive that neutrality is achieved by presenting 'both sides' of the story. They assume that every event has 'both sides,' rather than many sides, and that it is the journalists' role to give each party

the opportunity to express its views. By so doing, journalists believe they practice objective journalism. Reporter F tells how he establishes ‘both sides’:

You first deal with people who have knowledge of the issues invoked in the story. If it’s a story about wetland loss, you might deal with the local or national environmental groups specializing in that issue. *On the other side of the story*, you might deal with the oil company or developer accused of destroying wetlands (emphasis added).

In his statement ‘both sides’ are established based on the antagonists and protagonists involved in a news event, for instance, government vs. corporations, environmental groups vs. government or corporations. At the heart of this position of neutrality and balance is the notion of ‘conflict’ and the job of the journalists is to tease out and expose that conflict. Thus, on the surface, many environmental stories may appear to be classic ‘goodies against baddies,’ an ideal journalistic scenario. Reporter E, who has over thirty-year experience in environmental reporting, warns of the danger involved in this conflict-oriented approach to environmental stories:

Journalists, by nature, tend to be drawn to and report about conflicts. But often some of the more important stories don’t have conflicts. That’s sometimes a danger... especially in environmental stories. If a journalist writes about the conflict or controversy, you miss some of the bigger trend stories.

As stated above, the journalists in this interview perceive the production of environmental news not much different from the production of other daily news items. They understand that environmentalism is “the same as many other topics, such as education, health, welfare, crime. [I]t [the environment] is important, and it is something people are concerned about, so we pay attention to it.” Therefore, the same sets of news values, same assumptions about the hierarchy of sources, and same journalistic routines and conventions govern the environmental news production.

However, journalists also admit that the environment is a unique topic in certain respects: with environmental news, the causes and effects are generally much more difficult to get at and to explain compared to crime, politics, and sports. Environmental reporting is also unique in that it deals with long-term trends that involve a wide variety of complicated and often conflicting scientific information. Most of the reporters, however, do not have sufficient knowledge or training to explain the intricate nature of environmental problems or to evaluate ‘scientific evidences’ of environmental issues. Reporter B, for instance, admits that:

I took the beat without any background. As a rule, we don’t hire medical reporter with medical background, environmental reporter with environmental background. We don’t hire a crime reporter with police background. We hire reporters and they try to learn as much as they could. But frankly, there’s such a wide variety of field and there are issues that I don’t know of... Certainly, I am not a scientist and I certainly don’t know which is correct when there are conflicting stories.

Not only do reporters start their work without much background knowledge about the environment, but they receive little training in the newsroom. Thus, as reporter E points out,

“many environmental journalists learn on the job by doing their jobs.” This sometimes scares off journalists from environmental stories that involve complicated scientific information. Further, once the basic phenomenon has been described, the journalist can only “take the story in” if he or she is both able to understand the science at the heart of the problem and to explain it to a mass audience.

This strongly suggests that if the government or corporations present information in terms of complex scientific language, the complexity can discourage reporters from further investigations. Especially when the information has the potential to raise public controversy and criticism, the information providers are more likely to manipulate journalists by highlighting technical details.

As a common strategy in dealing with the scientific complexities and ambiguities of environmental problems, journalists turn to ‘the most knowledgeable persons,’ who usually are the experts or authorities. This means environmental newsmaking replicates the established hierarchy of news sources of daily journalism. In fact, the reporters’ lack of scientific knowledge makes them more vulnerable to and dependent on the ‘authorized knowers’ than are other general news reporters.

4.2. New Sources

New sources play a key role in providing definitions of events that are being covered. Interviews reveal that journalists in principle believe that everyone involved in a story is an equally important news source. In practice, however, some journalists try to give priority to people who are the immediate victims of environmental problems, especially when they cover health hazard stories. They believe that the media are there for the people, and those who suffer the immediate impact of an environmental hazard should make the most important sources. However, what the reporters anticipate from these sources are their immediate experiences rather than statements that carry much political significance. This is due to the idea that ordinary people do not have the authority to verify facts. As a consequence, journalists rely on government, scientists, and industry as relatively more important news sources because they are ‘decision makers’ or ‘policy setters.’

Reporter F’s list of typical news sources derived from his fifteen-year experience as an environmental reporter reveals the unconscious hierarchy which journalists defer to their sources:

Well, there are many news sources: journalists tend to cover government officials, United States EPA, state government agencies; journalists tend to write about business leaders involved in this; they write about university professors and scientists and their findings.

The way reporter A searches for the right person suggests that conventionalized assumptions about news sources may lead to a handful of ‘authorized knowers’ providing the public with limited viewpoints on an issue:

In some cases, you can find information out by asking people. I can call up a government agency and talk to their public relations person and I can say “who knows the most about this in your government agency?” If this topic has been written about before, we can see what else has been written, and *we can see what names pop up commonly as some of the major, you know, the people who are most involved* (emphasis added).

While journalists sympathize with ordinary citizens who are the victims of environmental problems, their perception of the environmental movement groups is not very positive. Lowe and Morrison (1984) found that the environmental groups receive much more favorable treatment in media coverage than do other pressure groups such as trade unions. Some of the reasons are: unlike trade unions, environmentalists, with the exception of a small number of extremely radical groups, do not challenge the existing social arrangement; the environment is a public interest issue of a non-partisan nature; journalists themselves are largely sympathetic to the environmental groups' causes.

However, journalists interviewed for this research responded that their view of environmental groups is the same as that of labor unions, religious groups, and any other social movement groups. They think that "all the (social movement) groups are advocates, all passionate about their niche (Reporter A)." Rather than being sympathetic to the environmental groups, interview respondents try to distance themselves from the environmental activist groups in order to adhere to the principle of neutrality. Some journalists even express a negative view of environmental groups because they are perceived as promoting certain interests. When asked if there are environmental groups he'd rather not cover, Reporter B answered "yes, but I prefer not to identify them. Their common characteristic is a shrill belief that their views are correct and newsworthy simply because they express them." Reporter B is skeptical of the credibility of the evidence or interpretation the environmental movement organizations provide:

There is a very wide spectrum of environmental groups. They have different tactics and goals and issues and political beliefs. Just because an environmental group says they have done a study on something, (that) doesn't mean that it's a good study....what I am saying is sometimes they will take information and interpret it in certain ways that might not necessarily mean anywhere close to what might be happening, and I'm not going to write stories scaring people.

The reluctance of journalists to trust evidence or research data offered by special interest groups was also detected in other studies (Greenberg *eds.* 1989; McDonald 1993). The low profile of activist groups in news coverage indicates that even though the pressure groups play a key role as claims makers in drawing the media attention to various environmental problems, it is to the official sources that the newsmakers turn for validation of their claims. In other words, the media turn to environmental pressure groups as news sources in order to represent 'the other side' of the issue.

On the other hand, officials and experts appear as trustworthy sources that have the authority to substantiate conflicting claims. Official sources offer prepackaged, easily summarized interpretation through the established channels between the media and the authority. Most journalists who do not feel qualified to sort out the often conflicting scientific, technical, and political claims involved in environmental problems turn to these informed sources.

4.3. News Values

As a whole, interview respondents rejected the very idea of 'news values' or 'news frame.' Due to the strong belief in the objectivity in their work, such notions as 'underlying values' or 'embedded worldviews' are largely out of the question to them. When the concept of news frame was given with a concrete example, they took it more as a 'story-formula' or

'how to efficiently process information' than as ideological assumptions that select and structure a story in a particular direction. When asked how he knows the way a story should be written, reporter F states that:

If it's a news story - meaning that it's happening today and needs to be in the paper tomorrow, the angle is going to be what happened. If it's more of a trend story, then it doesn't necessarily have to be so much what happened. It might be more about the general issue raised by the people really depends on the story what the angle is. Often times, you start the story with what is happening or what is new because it kinds of answers the question people have "why am I seeing this in the paper?," "Did something happen there?," "Why are they writing about this?," Somebody proposes a bill, to do such and such a thing, let's say institute a carbon tax. You write about what's in the bill; you ask the author of the bill why they did it; you write about people who are affected; people who want the bill; people who are going to oppose the bill you know. You lay it all out.

Since the reporters denied the existence of news value, the term was rephrased as "what makes an event a newsworthy story?" This question generated such categories as 'unexpectedness,' 'drama,' 'negativity,' 'unambiguity' and its potential impact on the public. The conscious or unconscious assumptions that equate news with unexpected incidents explain the prevalence of disaster or accident stories over other long-term environmental issues. For instance, stories about oil spills, toxic chemical leaks, or derailment of trains carrying toxic material are far more likely to make the news than is the destruction of biodiversity or the loss of marine resources. Even though problems with slow onset are likely to be much more hazardous and have longer-lasting effects, they tend to be invisible in the news because they seldom involve drama or spectacle. Even on occasions when the long-term, invisible issues are selected, it is the catastrophic disasters that provoke media attention to those chronic issues.

Journalistic preference for simplicity is another factor that prevents long-term environmental issues from being covered. These issues usually involve complicated and conflicting scientific and technical information, and so they are apt to be excluded from the news. When more complex, slow-onset environmental problems are being covered, they tend to be presented in a monocausal frame that fails to encompass the multifacetedness and interconnectedness of the environmental problems. Journalistic preference for simplicity often forces the movement organizations to simplify their message, at the expense of substantive information, in order to attract the media attention. Reporter E succinctly states this point:

A well-defined message has key components. First it is simple, direct, and concise. Environmental issues often contain a great deal of highly technical information. Reducing your campaign to a single slogan may seem next to impossible. It may not do your issue the justice it deserves. Remember to keep simple, concise, and direct.

Adherence to established news values, discussed above, often results in the event-oriented reporting typical of environmental news (Dunwoody and Griffin 1993; Einsiedal and Coughlan 1993; Sandman *et al.* 1987; Wilkins and Patterson 1990). Event-oriented reporting is promoted further by the daily routines of newsmaking that focuses on 'today' rather than the future, and by the professional ideology of objectivity, which identifies

journalist's prime goal as reporting what happened rather than investigating the nature and extent of the problem (Sandman 1987; Stocking and Leonard 1990). Stories on government actions, citizen lawsuits, and consent decrees outnumber reports analyzing overarching issues or trends.

When journalists cover long-term environmental issues, such as climate change or acid rain, they portray them as the recent outcome of an event rather than as the inevitable outcome of a series of political and economic decisions (Wilkins and Patterson 1990). By focusing on the discrete events instead of the larger social and political contexts in which they occur, environmental news tends to create the impression that individuals or errant corporations are responsible for those problems rather than current business practices or institutional politics (Smith 1992; Wilkins and Patterson 1990). In other words, the media's focus on individual events decontextualize the events by treating them as novelties, further obscuring the interconnection of events and issues to the underlying systematic practices that need to be changed (Daley and O' Neill 1991).

In the case of television, visuals play a significant role in deciding which item will make environmental news. Television journalists tend to prefer information that is visual in nature. Some stories can easily be packaged to conform to television's requirement, while others are more difficult or cannot be handled at all. As reporter D puts it, "how does one take a picture of the earth getting warmer or how does one show soil or ground water contaminated?" Thus, good stories sometimes go unreported because they are too difficult, time-consuming, or expensive to illustrate, or impossible to visualize. According to reporter D:

Like it or loathe it, television news depends on visuals to make its point. We should never ignore questions involving, say nuclear plant safety because we lack the visuals. But the reality is that the barrier island destruction story is easier and more dramatic for television to tell. So, it's incumbent on TV journalists to put the visuals to their highest possible use.

In a similar vein, reporter A admits that "TV news is visually oriented and generally thin on substance. Events that promise good visuals and background are more likely to attract TV coverage than a more substantial event." Television's preference for good visuals exerts constraints on topic selection and on the way news is presented, at the network level these constraints are offset to some extent by research and strong graphics. If interesting visuals are not secured for a given topic, which is often the case, the essence of an environmental problem is more likely to be presented in a single dramatic image like a drum of toxic material, a discarded syringe on the beach, a head of foam on the surface of a trickling stream.

4.4. Pressure from Editors, Management and Advertisers

Journalists perceive that they enjoy high degree of autonomy in the newsroom. Interview generated three findings: respondents believe that there are no written or unwritten newsroom policies about how to make environmental news; they feel no perceived pressure from the management or advertisers; and legal concerns tend to restrain reporters from actively investigating corporate or government activities.

All the interviewees insisted that their newsrooms do not have any written or unwritten policy about environmental newsmaking, and that the same is true for other news beats. According to reporter C:

The media is [sic] pretty independent in the United States and on any given issue individual news directors and editors make their decision on what to cover, what not to cover, how to cover it. I don't think there's any policy on environment or on any other area.

Even though there is no written newsroom policy about environmental news making, interview findings suggest that constraints on environmental reporters do exist, work in the newsroom. Above all, competition in the newsroom imposes a constraint on environmental news. When asked what is the biggest constraint on environmental newsmaking, reporter E replies:

The biggest constraint, like most journalism, is having the time, resources, and space to tell the story. Environmental stories are by their nature complicated - they are not easy stories to tell and explain. The big problem environmental writers face is convincing editors to give them enough time and space. It's hard to tell these stories in a minute and half in the radio or television or in a 500-word story in a newspaper.

In such an atmosphere, the amount of time and space given to relatively new subject areas comes under intense pressure. Consequently, the amount of nurturing that new subject areas require is often neglected. Therefore, it is very difficult for new environmental issues to find their way into the established news topics.

In their relationship with editors, individual reporters perceive that they have an autonomy in topic selection and presentation. Reporters say they have not felt any pressure from the editor or the news desk about what to cover and how to cover it. Reporter B, editor of St. Paul Pioneer Press admits that some editors think environmental news is important. But he quickly adds that does not mean that editors have any influence on an individual reporter's decisions. The same autonomy is also perceived to exist in the relationship between reporters and their parent companies. Journalists claim that the "newsroom should be independent no matter who owns it, and the parent company should not be making decisions about what the newsroom can and cannot do." They also deny any influence from the corporate advertisers on newsroom operation and on news content. Reporter D explains this autonomy from a market-oriented perspective:

In my twenty year experience in this business, I have never been asked not to do a story because it offends an advertiser. Most broadcasters understand that their highest responsibility is to the viewer, and if they approach their jobs in that way, the viewer will respond by watching. The more they watch, the higher the advertising dollar.

However, reporters are aware of cases where advertisers exerted tremendous pressure on environmental news reporting¹ and become more cautious when they deal with large

¹ For instance, Fox Network yielded to the threat from Monsanto - a giant chemical company - and fired two reporters who did an investigative report on Monsanto's growth hormone. The network also withdrew the story from one of its local stations. Similarly, Disney exerted pressure on ABC

corporations. Reporters think those who hold higher positions such as network bureau chief or news directors who decide in the first place what is to be covered and what is not may feel more direct pressure from the advertisers or the management.

At the reporter's level, legal concerns prove to be more immediate factor that restrain journalists from actively investigating corporations, government or other powerful social groups. According to reporter C, an anchor and reporter at an NBC affiliate in Minneapolis, legal concerns prevail in the production of an investigative report:

There is almost nothing in a newscast that is not very much planned, particularly in packaged stories. Every second is produced. The kind of stories I do here - a lot of investigative stories - they deal with things like undercover cameras, they deal with cases that are on the way to the court, could go to court or are maybe in court now. There are issues related to even how we go about obtaining information, let alone how we report it. And any good reporter is going to sit down with a good lawyer before they go collecting information on a very sensitive case. They tell me where are the minefields, where are the things I can go along. I joke that I spend more time with lawyers here than I do with editors. You need to come to a conclusion (about whether or not to cover a story) through deliberate contemplation of the consequences for your action.

Concern about possible legal disputes, in many cases, discourages many journalists from getting into sensitive issues, especially issues that cast the powerful in an unflattering light. As reporter C puts it, "getting access to, and gaining evidence of the questionable practices of the powerful without using surreptitious measures is hard in the first place." This significantly limits his topic selection and the extent to which he can pursue his investigation. When information is gathered, lawyers recommend that journalists eliminate any element related to a possible legal dispute. This effectively prevents many issues from being explored in depth. According to reporter C:

...the lawyers say to stay away from very specific delineations unless they are absolutely necessary. I talk to the lawyers before I go and shoot a story. I talk to them part way through the story if it is a big story - I certainly talk to them before we broadcast. *I find that to be great value to me professionally. How to do a job better* (emphasis added).

His statement strongly suggests that constant interaction with the lawyers is a way of 'professionally' orienting reporters to how to process information 'safely' even though reporters do not recognize it as such.

5. CONCLUSION

As Stocking and Leonard (1990) puts it, the environmental story is one of the most complicated and pressing stories of our time. It involves abstract and probabilistic science, labyrinthine laws, and the complex interplay of individuals and societies. Perhaps

regarding an investigative story about the safety of Disney's theme park and prevented the story from being aired.

environmental issues need more careful and longer-than-bite-sized reporting and analysis. However, analysis of environmental news content shows that the emphasis is less on the nature of conditions which underlie the environmental problems and more on the immediate visible consequences of the problem. Specifically, law suits, spills and other dramatic incidents are preferred over other invisible long-term issues like global warming or destruction of rainforests. Environmental movement groups are treated the same as trade union members being implicitly blamed for the disruption of normal commerce. Some studies in news sociology tradition examined why environmental news is the way it is and concluded that it is precisely because the same daily routines are governing the production of environmental news. This study reached the same conclusion, but it identified less discussed constraints such as fear against possible lawsuits which is exacerbated by reporters' lack of scientific knowledge, journalists' perception of balance and neutrality as influencing environmental news outputs.

The interview findings reveal that American journalists as a whole show a firm belief in the autonomy of newsroom and individual reporters in covering environmental stories. Serving public interest is their top priority and they "attempt to make the best decision under any circumstances (reporter A)." However, despite the fact that journalists are well-meaning professionals seeking and objective presentation of reality, interview findings indicate that professional ideology, and established work routines and conventions contribute to the production of the mainstream definition of environment by systematically ruling out unfamiliar and hard-to-prove ideas and values.

Specifically, the interviews reveal five factors that influence the production of environmental news. First, despite the journalists' denial of any pressure from the management or advertisers, the recent decision of Fox to withdraw an investigative story on chemical giant Monsanto proves the existence of such pressure. However, pressure from a parent company or from advertisers is rarely publicized, so it is hard to state how often and to what extent they can exert influence on news content. But when journalists hear about such cases, no matter how remote from their own work, their investigations on corporate activities are discouraged: the intensity of criticism is mitigated by the fear of their story being removed or their "getting into trouble."

Second, concerns about legal disputes constrain what can be said and what cannot in the news. Reporters are constantly reminded of the possible legal consequences of their actions, and this discourages them from actively criticizing the status quo.

Third, journalists' strong commitment to the professional ideology of objectivity leads them generally to define every event in terms of 'two different sides' of stories. As a consequence, 'conflict' and 'the two perspectives' are emphasized when in fact many environmental events do not involve conflict, or have many different sides. The commitment to objectivity also results in the reporters' reliance on official sources since they need 'authorized knowers' who can verify certain claims with credibility and responsibility.

Fourth, this dependence on official sources is further entrenched by most journalists' lack of scientific knowledge and training. Their search for the 'most knowledgeable person' often leads them to contact government agencies or their public relations personnel for a news source. As a consequence, a handful of individuals or organizations, who more often than not speak for the established interests, are interviewed repeatedly as major informants. Interviews with reporters revealed that environmental news has developed the same hierarchy of news sources conventionalized in other news beats.

Fifth, journalists assume that environmental news making is basically identical to general news production, the only difference being in the kinds of information they deal with. The same cultural and ideological assumptions governing general news production underlie environmental news making. However, since journalists are not aware of, or refuse to admit, underlying values, ideological assumptions embedded in news needs to be read through careful examination of the news text.

As a whole, interview results indicate that journalists work with similar kinds of constraints and pressures which reporters in general are experiencing in daily work of newsmaking. This leads to the content and format of environmental story as they are. In order to overcome these constraints, environmental issues must be perceived as occupying a distinctive story niche rather than simply overlapping a multitude of existing subject areas - politics, business, agriculture, science and technology, etc. Also, some ways must be found to establish environmental journalism more as an investigative journalism where the effect of the existing constraining forces could be relieved.

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