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STICKY NOTES

Here's a modest proposal. The Society of Environmental Journalists should consider changing its name.

It's not as wild a notion as it might seem. Think of it as an exercise in what the marketing folks call "re-branding," which might, just might, put SEJ in a better position to grow and flourish in a changing media landscape.

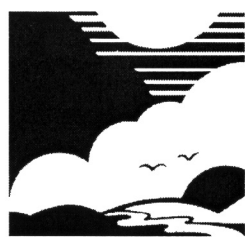
A changed name—my thought is that only a slight change is warranted—also might better reflect and promote SEJ's official vision of "an informed society through excellence in environmental journalism" and its official mission of "improving the quality, accuracy, and visibility of environmental reporting."

As has been well stated by others, any cyclical de-emphasis or downgrading that the environment beat, as a distinct beat, may have experienced in recent years at some media outlets doesn't tell the whole story about the overall status of journalism on environmental subjects.

Coverage of environmental issues and environmental aspects of broader issues shows up in a lot of other places, too—on local government beats, by feature writers, in reporting on the amorphous cluster of topics called "growth" and "sprawl."

I can't claim any statistical authority—no content analyses to cite—but I think it's correct to say, as various SEJ leaders and other members have done, that environmental awareness has increasingly migrated into other news beats and morphed into other journalistic forms since SEJ was founded

—see *Just Thinking*, p. 2



ENVIRONMENT Writer

'State of Media' Report Offers Valuable Insights for Working Press

Environmental reporters who turn to the newly released "State of the News Media 2004" report with a narrow focus on environmental journalism may be doing themselves a disservice.

The new report from the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the first in what is to be an annual series, provides little direct grist on environmental coverage or, for that matter, on coverage of any other specific beat. Do a word search on the report on the word "environment" at <http://stateofthemedias.org>, and you won't exactly come up empty-handed. You'll simply miss the forest in pursuit of the occasional tree.

Forget the word search. Take the time to read the entire document—or, at the very least, the extensive chapter dealing with

your particular medium, newspapers, TV, cable, radio, web, whatever. Read it online for all the search and query benefits that that approach clearly provides and as the Center itself encourages. But also print it out, and read it "the old-fashioned way" too.

The Herculean report, funded substantially by the Pew Charitable Trusts, provides some at-times sobering reading for those who have chosen to make journalism their life's work. For many who have watched trends and patterns closely over past years, the information may be not so much eye-opening as it is, for better or worse, confirming for what they know and sense based on their own experiences.

—see *State of Media*, p. 8

Pete Myers' 'Above the Fold' Off to Impressive Start for Reporters

Bill Dawson

In just a few months, former foundation executive Pete Myers' daily email news summary, *Above the Fold*, and its companion website, *Environmental Health News*, have become known as highly useful tools for environmental journalists.

The reason can be grasped in just a glance at one recent issue, March 24. On that day alone, online subscribers received a list of links to articles from the *New York Times*, *Agence France-Presse*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Reuters*, *Nature*, *Johannesburg Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Chemical and Engineering News*, and *Syracuse Post-Standard*.

In addition, they were directed to the *Environmental Health News* website, where a typically voluminous list of additional article summaries and links appeared—64 in all, from newspapers and other publications around the world. As on other days,

most were related in some way to the service's broad topic of pollution and exposure to environmental contaminants.

An obvious question is how Myers has been able to provide such a far-reaching service, day after day, working practically by himself so far. Although he laughingly said that providing an answer would be a little like pulling back the famous curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*, he didn't hesitate to reveal his secret:

First, he said, he employs a number of "canned searches" through *Google News*, developed over time to reduce the possibility of missing key stories.

Second, "some papers are not indexed by *Google* but have good reporters, and I make sure to go to those sites."

Third, because even *Google's* "incredibly valuable" searches miss some things around "the periphery" of the broad subject

—see *Pete Myers*, p. 4

STICKY NOTES (from p. 1)

in 1990. Which brings me back to the idea of a new name for the organization.

Is SEJ still primarily an organization of “environmental journalists,” which I understand to mean reporters on the “environment beat” plus others who spend most or much of their time on environmental topics?

Or is it primarily an organization that works for excellent coverage of environmental issues—wherever that’s done and whoever does it?

If it’s the latter, then maybe a different name would be more appropriate. Something that expresses the group’s broader dedication to helping all journalists who deal with environmental subjects, not just those lucky ones assigned to a defined and dedicated beat.

SEJ’s website already reflects this wider identity by prominently declaring itself as “the source for journalists reporting on the environment.” A new name could echo that

very phrase and project its message for the organization as a whole.

“SEJ” is a well-known and widely-used shorthand name for the group, and not just among its members, so it would be well to hold on to it. (After all, KFC, which now touts its “kitchen fresh chicken,” didn’t jettison its longstanding initials just because it de-emphasized its state of origin and famous cooking method.)

A couple of plausible tweakings of SEJ’s full name immediately come to mind. Society for the Environment in Journalism is one, though it’s admittedly stilted. Better, I think, would be Society for Environmental Journalism.

Other possibilities with the same theme readily suggest themselves, though they depart from the current, time-honored initials: Society for Excellence in Environmental Journalism. Society for Reporting on the En-

vironment. Journalists’ Society for Environmental Coverage.

A new name along these lines also might help correct the chronic misimpression that seems to linger in some quarters—that the Society of Environmental Journalists is actually the Society of Environmentalist Journalists. To my ear, at least, “Society for Environmental Journalism” doesn’t lend itself quite so readily to the same error, which may flow subconsciously from the simple fact that “environmentalist” and “journalist” share the same final five letters.

None of this is to suggest that considering a new name is as important a task as, say, building an endowment to take SEJ into the future. But I do think it might help with that challenging job, reflecting SEJ’s expansive mission and its expanding membership.

—Bill Dawson

HEDES AND TALES

The tales that headlines tell...

“Beware ‘Sound Science.’ It’s Double-speak for Trouble”
—Washington Post, March 1, 2004

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“In The Northwest: Leaders giving a cold shoulder to climatic trends”

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 1, 2004

“Eco-friendly toilet gets the job done in a single flush”

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer, February 28, 2004

“Home meth labs leave toxic trail”

—Duluth, MN., News Tribune, March 2, 2004

“Studies link chemicals to health woes”

—Providence Journal, February 9, 2004

“Carmakers Pull Plug on Electric Vehicles”

—New York Times, March 28, 2004

“Pollution and the Slippery Meaning of ‘Clean’”

—New York Times, March 28, 2004

“The Clean Air Act: At what cost?: Oil firms, Sierra Club want waiver for state on adding ethanol to gas”

—Sacramento Bee, March 28, 2004

“The EPA’s trash”

—Toledo Blade, March 28, 2004

“U.S. Trims Request for Exemptions from Pact on Saving Ozone Layer”

—New York Times, March 28, 2004

“Record Fine is Expected in Oil Spill”

—Boston Globe, March 27, 2004

“We must die sooner in order to survive”
—Miami Herald, March 27, 2004

“15 years after Exxon Valdez, oil spill prevention efforts still lagging”

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 26, 2004

“Mich. Gov. restricts out-of-state garbage”

—Associated Press, March 26, 2004

“Petroleum becomes political”

—Dallas Morning News, March 24, 2004

“Sierra Club ads target Bush on toxic waste cleanup”

—Associated Press, March 24, 2004

“Human-marine balance studied by U.S., partners”

—Miami Herald, March 23, 2004

“Limits Urged on Eating Tuna: U.S. Agencies Cite Levels of Mercury”

—Washington Post, March 20, 2004

“Pollution Dispute in Northwest Straddles the Border”

—New York Times, March 20, 2004

“Love Canal Declared Clean, Ending Toxic Horror”

—New York Times, March 18, 2004

 REPORTS FROM METCALF INSTITUTE SCIENCE JOURNALISM WORKSHOPS

Times' Revkin Points to Challenges, Opportunities in Boosting Media Coverage of Science Issues

The process of covering the news can sometimes complicate effective reporting, but better communication among scientists and journalists can help strengthen science reporting by the mass media, says a leading New York Times science writer.

Science writer Andrew C. Revkin told a workshop for journalists and scientists that pressures to be “first,” time and space constraints, and other factors can add to the difficulties in reporting comprehensively on science news. But improved communication between scientists and journalists, increased transparency, and a mutual recognition of each other’s internal work cultures can lead to better science reporting, he told a group of 20 invited journalists and climate scientists, including two Nobel Prize winners.

Revkin and climate scientist Stephen H. Schneider, Stanford University, were keynote speakers at a workshop in March sponsored by the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting, publisher of this newsletter. The workshop, held at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California, is the second

in a series sponsored by the National Science Foundation’s Paleoclimate Program, in the Division of Atmospheric Sciences. (See related story below and at http://www.environmentwriter.org/resources/reports/November_03_workshop.htm.)

For two days, scientists and journalists discussed the complexities of climate change news coverage and how they can communicate better to improve coverage by the media. Some of the inevitable constraints of journalism, Revkin said, include competition for space and position within a newspaper, news filters such as relevancy and the tendency to provide he-said, she-said perspectives on controversial issues, and daily risk-taking that is common to the business of reporting the news.

Journalists and scientists operate in similar ways—both are competitive, they want to get there first, and both move on an ongoing “trajectory” toward truth, said Revkin. These similarities between science and journalism also can lead to communications problems, he said.

—see Revkin, p. 4

Workshop Series Aims to Strengthen Science Communications Through Media

Dale Willman

It’s like herding cats. That’s an oft-used phrase to describe the bringing together of journalists. And after trying to gather journalists and scientists for a Metcalf Institute workshop in Rhode Island, the same phrase might apply to both groups. Or perhaps better yet, herding tigers.

The often-solitary nature of both fields means each is filled with people who tend to challenge authority and question conventional wisdom. The best not only tend to, but also need to. However, these attributes can combine to make it difficult for a group from either profession to agree on anything. Especially when it comes to the reporting of science news.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings to come out of the first workshop in this series was the reality that among many of those in attendance, the state of science reporting has not yet reached a Red Alert.

Does this mean there is no cause for concern? No. But it does mean there is perhaps a little time to continue with a reasonable discussion on how to improve the communication of science via the mass media.

The question, then, is how to do that. Out of the discussions there came several guiding points. I call them broad truths—and perhaps first among them is the realization that neither scientists nor journalists adequately understands the cultures unique to each group.

Some journalists still regard scientists as living in remote ivory towers, obsessed with obscure details and able to speak only in arcane jargon.

And some scientists see journalists as heartless hacks. They think reporters routinely focus on the sensational at the cost of truth, and will cover only things that sizzle, rather than those that simply simmer.

While there may be some truth to each stereotype, the realities are much different. But the fact that stereotypes exist means that scientists and journalists still have some work to do to gain a mutual trust in each other.

Scientists, for instance, are deadly afraid of being misquoted, and they see many reporters as being prone to misquoting. And they are concerned that errors in stories cannot be challenged.

There are sometimes valid reasons for their concerns. But if they understood the role of a journalist better, they would know that reporters don’t willfully misquote. Nor are they reluctant to correct mistakes.

The fact is, journalists have absolutely nothing but their credibility. If sloppy reporting regularly occurs, the journalist’s credibility suffers, and with it the trust from their work.

So it’s in the reporter’s interest to get science information right. That, of course, doesn’t mean they always will. But if they don’t, it is incumbent upon the scientist to help make it right. They should share their knowledge, and most importantly their time. And reporters should be more encouraging of such behavior.

As sources for stories, scientists often ask how they can prevent

—see *Herding Cats*, p. 8

Pete Myers (from p. 1)

area on which he focuses, he also surveys about 50 newspaper websites daily.

It's clearly been a lot of work for Myers, who has a PhD in animal ecology and who was formerly senior vice president for science at the National Audubon Society and a director of the W. Alton Jones Foundation. Myers also is a co-author, with Theo Colburn and former Boston Globe environmental reporter Dianne Dumanoski, of "Our Stolen Future," a well-known book about hormone-disrupting chemicals.

"It turns out that doing this every day has been more time consuming than I expected, but I wanted it to be predictable, reliable and comprehensive," he said.

With just a few exceptions, he has been able to produce new editions daily, issued around mid-morning eastern time, even when he was thousands of miles away in Hawaii or other countries.

He's been looking for people to help with the work, which will soon include providing a searchable database of articles on the website. Perhaps a year from now, Myers also hopes to unveil yet another search engine "to give context to individual articles"—links to related stories and to related scientific studies.

Now a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists, he was a funder of the organization at the now-defunct Jones Foundation. It was during his 1990–2001 association with the foundation that Myers said he became increasingly impressed by how rapidly the science of environmental health was changing.

In late 2001, when the Jones Foundation disbanded, he started thinking about what service he might provide that would make it easier to learn about, and report on, this field.

"I had the germ of an idea of a news service that collates how the news media are covering environmental health and what's new in the science," he said. A year later, in late 2002, he realized that new software tools facilitating the aggregation and dissemination of news made the idea a possibility. The Environmental Health News website appeared in June 2003 and the first Above

Revkin (from p. 3)

Using examples from his own reporting, he emphasized the importance of transparency when talking with the press. He explained how he had expected "shields and robocop armor to go up" when he traveled recently to Alaska to interview a State of Alaska scientist researching whether the Alaska tundra could withstand an extended travel season to support more energy production. Funded by Department of Energy, the results of the scientist's research could lead to modifying rules that determine how many days a year oil convoys can move across the delicate tundra.

What Revkin at first imagined might be a "great gotcha story" changed as the forthright and enthusiastic scientist openly discussed his research and what the outcomes might be.

Striving to accurately portray truth is not only a matter of reporting facts and figures correctly, although getting things right is the reporter's first responsibility, Revkin emphasized. A balanced

The Fold summaries were emailed last August.

Myers' resume includes advocacy work, but he said he casts a broad net in picking articles to feature.

"It's important for people to understand what's current in the press," he said. "We don't try to be censors, though I've bitten my tongue now and then because I believed some articles were spinning, particularly in the opinion section."

Still, he thinks more information is better than less: "We'll all be better off if we're fully informed."

Besides the news summary, which appears on the left side of the EHN homepage (www.environmentalhealthnews.org) under the heading "In the News," there are two other sections—"New Science," which has links to recent studies, and "New Reports," with links to publications by advocacy groups such as U.S. PIRG and the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Environmental Health News and Above The Fold are products of the not-for-profit Environmental Health Sciences, which also produces two other websites, <http://www.OurStolenFuture.org> and, in partnership with another group, <http://www.ProtectingOurHealth.org>.

The latter site, Myers said, is designed to further his "goal to make new scientific findings accessible to people with conditions that might be linked to environmental exposures"—conditions for which "good science is saying it's plausible there are links."

EHS, the parent group, has received funding from the Jennifer Altman Foundation, Beldon Fund, Homeland Foundation, John Merck Fund, David and Lucile Packard Foundation and V.K. Rasmussen Foundation, according to the Environmental Health News website.

Compiling the news summaries daily has been challenging, but also enlivening, work, Myers said.

"One of the invigorating things about Environmental Health News is seeing the topography of stories every day, in which some bubble up and are then picked up by national venues." ■

he-said, she-said story may be correct, he said, but it is often in the gray area that the real meaning and value of a story reside. The formula of objective, balanced reporting does not always describe the truth, nor does it adequately represent distortion and spin, he cautioned.

Revkin pointed to his own reporting in covering glacial melting on Mt. Kilimanjaro and how Kilimanjaro has become an icon for the climate debate. The crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996 provided valuable lessons for scientists and journalists in covering science-based "spin" and how reporters need to avoid becoming vested in a particular story line or "trajectory." He joined with other reporters participating in the workshop in advising scientists not to suppress the "passion" they feel for their work, saying that doing so can help foster counterproductive stereotypes of scientists as being remote and aloof from the public and society. ■

A 'Connect the Dots' News Service

Headwaters News: Building Identity 'One Day, One Headline at a Time'

On some days, a casual visitor to the website of Headwaters News might be excused for assuming it's primarily intended as a summary of environmental news stories from the Rocky Mountain region.

Five of seven articles featured on the homepage on March 29, for instance, had strong environmental connections, and a sixth was about worker injuries at nuclear waste cleanup sites.

On the site's page two, with summaries and links for other articles of note, there were five articles under the Environment heading that same day. Three articles appeared in both the Community and Economy categories, and two each under Politics and Legislature.

This article is one in an Environment Writer series about Web-based environmental journalism.

But despite appearances, the people behind Headwaters insist the five-year-old website (<http://www.headwatersnews.org>) is not an environmental publication, but a broad-focus news website that reflects the pervasive role of environmental concerns and issues in the region.

The mission of its publisher—the University of Montana's Center for the Rocky Mountain West—is “to develop a regional identity for the Rocky Mountain West,” Headwaters editor Greg Lakes said.

The basic premise behind that mission, he said, is that it makes more sense to consider the region's issues from the perspective of shared cultural, social, and economic features, rather than along the lines of political boundaries.

“Headwaters helps build that identity one day at a time, one headline at a time,” Lakes said. “It's a daily snapshot of where the region is as a first step toward deciding where we want it to go.”

He acknowledged that “a big proportion of what we do is environmental news,” but said he and Daniel Kemmis, an author and former elected official who is director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West, “adamantly” believe Headwaters is “not an environmental newsletter or news service.”

“Reporting on the Rockies”—the Headwaters slogan—would be an impossible task, however, without providing a lot of environmental material, since so many contentious, often resource-related, issues in the region stem from the huge proportion of land in public ownership there.

“On almost any major issue, if you scratch deeply enough, there's an environmental aspect to it,” Lakes said.

In choosing which articles from the region's press to feature, one of the toughest jobs involves deciding which of the Headwaters categories to place them in, he said. “That's part of the beauty of Headwaters. It's a connect-the-dots news service. We put the dots out there and let users connect them.”

A veteran Montana newspaper reporter and editor, Lakes is Headwaters' only full-time employee. With the help of a half-time assistant editor but without the assistance of any news-selecting software tools, he picks the articles the website features each day.

The online versions of 40 to 50 publications are surveyed each morning, from British Columbia and Alberta in Canada down to the Mexican border areas of Arizona and New Mexico. Before picking

an article, Lakes wants to know if it “tells us something about the West.”

With that approach, he seeks to “build context for the region” and looking, for instance, at the same issue in Edmonton and Phoenix, or at different issues in the same region.

Another way to provide context is through Headwaters' original journalistic content—a collection of material that appears biweekly under the Western Perspective heading.

The centerpiece is a new guest column on a certain topic every two weeks, many written by newspaper reporters. Lake writes an accompanying column on the same subject, built around links to relevant articles from various newspapers. Readers pitch in with letters of reaction and comment that are published on the same web page. The author of the guest column follows up through the two weeks after its original posting with further thoughts in a weblog.

Lakes hopes next to find funding to support a new Perspective package every week. Meanwhile, other original content on the website has included a collaboration with the University of Colorado's Center for the American West, producing a series of interviews with former secretaries of the Interior.

With more plans and ideas than money, “our problem as a non-profit is how to pay the bills,” Lakes said.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provided a three-year grant to launch Headwaters and has continued to provide funding.* Other funders for Headwaters have included the Liz Claiborne & Art Ortenberg Foundation. The Northwest Area Foundation has funded reporting on poverty-related issues, and Headwaters recently completed its second annual fundraising drive, collecting about \$8,000 from readers who weren't asked for any specific amount.

Through a partnership with a coalition of public television stations, Headwaters has also been providing fresh news content daily for the coalition's web pages devoted to its special projects on various issues.

“It's one service we sell, one way we're trying to make ourselves self-sustaining,” Lakes said. ■

*Editor's note: The Hewlett Foundation also funds the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting, publisher of Environment Writer, on population-related communication issues.

QUOTABLE

“...if you watched a commercial nightly newscast every week-night for a month—some 10 hours of programming—you would have seen: ...About four minutes on the environment.”

The State of the News Media 2004:
An Annual Report on American Journalism
Project for Excellence in Journalism

READING RACK

“Perry wants part of Ellis off ozone list,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, March 26, 2004 and “Donors have stake in smog move,” The Dallas Morning News, March 20, 2004: The two major dailies in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area, which also comprises a single non-attainment area for ground-level ozone under the Clean Air Act, have been covering a smog-related controversy that bears watching elsewhere in the country. The Star-Telegram’s Scott Streater reported on March 26 that Texas Gov. Rick Perry wants to exempt most of one county, Ellis, from the pollution-reduction mandates that apply to the non-attainment area as a whole. It’s a state proposal to US EPA, Streater reported, “that critics say could weaken clean-air efforts nationwide,” by setting “a dangerous precedent and encourage(ing) industries to simply move outside the boundary.” Heretofore, the EPA has held that entire counties must be included in non-attainment areas, and other states have been denied permission to create the kind of “partial designations” that Perry wants. In the Morning News, Randy Lee Loftis revealed on March 20 that U.S. Rep. Joe Barton, a Republican from Ellis County and chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, had pushed to exempt the entire county from the toughest ozone-reduction rules. This effort by Barton, Loftis reported, “could directly benefit two corporations linked to Barton campaign donations” corporations now seeking state permits to boost allowed emissions of smog-causing pollution. “Although most of Ellis County is rural, it is North Texas’ center of heavy industry, accounting for about 40 percent of the region’s industrial emissions,” Loftis wrote. Perry’s proposal would group “the heavily industrial northwest corner of Ellis County” with the rest of the Dallas-Fort Worth non-attainment area for emission-reduction purposes, Streater reported. The rest of the county, however, “would be shielded from severe sanctions” that might hit an insufficient smog-reduction effort.

“Welcome to Armageddon,” Salon and Rolling Stone, March 23, 2004: Miles Harvey makes this 4,500-word story of a single Superfund site resonate not only with human character and horror, but with policy implications. He makes the aging eccentric fluorine chemist Edward Tyczkowski come off a bit like Doc Brown in “Back to the Future”—except that he is playing with chemical weapons in his backyard shed instead of time machines. When EPA’s attention was finally called to Tyczkowski’s Rock Hill, Tennessee, chemical junkyard in the year 2000, it was strewn with some 7,000 drums and gas cylinders, many unlabeled, leaking, and rusting. Among the contents found was the chemical warfare agent PFIB. Tyczkowski had actually been doing work as a contractor for Department of Defense chemical weapons programs. DOD told Harvey that security at such facilities was the contractor’s responsibility—not DOD’s. Had a terrorist known the agents were there, he or she could have walked in and helped themselves to lethal quantities. Harvey does not miss the fact that security was first provided by experienced EPA emergency removal teams although the government’s first policy choice today has been to leave chemical security to an unregulated industry and the Department of Homeland Security. <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2004/03/23/armageddon/> or <http://www.rollingstone.com/features/nationalaffairs/featuregen.asp?pid=2834>

“GloFish makes waves in gene pool, raising questions about ethics, safety,” The Washington Post, March 14, 2004: Originally developed to monitor water for pollution, the genetically altered zebrafish are red and glow under black lights and are being sold as “the nation’s first officially sanctioned genetically modified pet,” according to author Griff Witte. Even though the Food and Drug Administration has ruled that the fish does not need to be regulated, debate has been sparked over biotechnology. “Most scientists agree GloFish poses little danger to human health or the environment, but a public-interest group has sued the government to stop its sale until the fish can be reviewed more thoroughly,” with some experts pointing out “that the science behind gene alteration is in its infancy, and the ramifications of such rapid changes in the genetic code are unknown.” Others question “whether such cutting-edge science should be used for such frivolous purposes.” Proponents of the GloFish point out its value as a tool for teaching people about biology. There are also such potential advantages as genetically modified pets that will not aggravate the pet owner’s allergies or animals that will not be as susceptible to ailments such as hip dysplasia.

“Lawyer Who Challenged EPA Case Had Social Contracts with Judges,” The Wall Street Journal, March 23, 2004: John J. Fialka details findings from a watchdog group’s report showing that the lead industry attorney in a highly sensitive appeals court clean air case had hob-nobbed with appellate judges at a guest ranch...courtesy of a Bozeman, Mont., conservative group and about the time the case was being decided, in 1999. The Foundation for Research on Economics & the Environment, FREE, funded primarily by corporate interests, hosted Judges Douglas Ginsburg and David Sentelle and industry lawyer Ed Warren. Both Ginsburg and Warren were directors of the group, and Ginsburg was among the judges making the decision. Fialka calls the case “one of the biggest environmental cases of the 1990s,” and he writes that the appeals court struck down EPA soot and smog regulations, saying Congress had not authorized the agency to issue those rules. The U.S. Supreme Court later reversed that decision. Fialka quotes a Fordham University legal ethics professor as saying he had been retained by one of the foundations supporting FREE and had found the practice allowable in light of “existing norms.” The watchdog group’s leader—Douglas T. Kendall of the Community Rights Counsel, sees things differently, pointing to “serious ethical problems.”

“GOP Split by Environment Strategy: Talking Points Rile Moderates as Party Looks to Fight with Democrats,” Gannett News Service, March 23, 2004: Anticipating strong hits by Democratic partisans in this election season, Republican House leaders advise colleagues’ press officers to blow off concerns about global warming and pooh-pooh reported links between air pollution and childhood asthma and concerns about polluted rivers and lakes. “Global warming is not a fact,” the House leaders attest, pointing to MIT Scientist Richard Lindzen to fortify their view. “Republicans can’t

—see Reading Rack, p. 7

Local Reporter Challenges Brockovich Veracity

Erin Brockovich's law firm claimed in a suit filed in April 2003 that benzene fumes from an oil well on the grounds of Beverly Hills High School was causing cancer in former students. The big media ate it up—but the claims behind the headlines may have had little factual basis.

Erin Brockovich has been a hero to environmental muckrakers and investigative types ever since Julia Roberts immortalized her in the year-2000 movie named after her. The 1993 toxic-tort class action in which she organized 650 little-guy residents of Hinckley, California, to slay the Goliath of Pacific Gas & Electric was portrayed as a victory of truth over power. Well...a settlement at least.

Now a story by Los Angeles Times reporter Eric Umansky in Columbia Journalism Review reminds us that funny things may happen to the truth in La-La Land. The kicker headline: "Muckraker 90210." It's a cautionary tale reminding environmental journalists that any story good enough for a screenplay may be too good to be true.

Brockovich's (now Brockovich-Ellis) law firm of Masry & Vitotie, had filed 25 suits against the Beverly Hills School District claiming that an oil well under the high school's athletic field was emitting high levels of benzene. The school district and the South Coast Air Quality Management District disputed the claim, saying benzene levels at the school were comparable to background levels.

Umansky's story replays the events of the 2003 media frenzy at slow speed—noting, for example, that Brockovich called the local CBS affiliate (KCBS) with her claim of high benzene levels before even talking to the school district.

Enter Norma Zager, editor of the Beverly Hills Courier, a small free weekly, who attended early meetings and told Umansky she sensed a "scam." Brockovich and Ed Masry, she said, dodged potential claimants' requests for explanations of why government regulators had found only normal benzene levels.

As Zager kept digging into the story, the media frenzy continued. Environmental agencies and health experts kept finding no evidence of toxic hydrocarbons at the site, and the Brockovich-Masry firm kept refusing to disclose the test results on which their original case was based. Finally, the city subpoenaed their results and a judge ordered them to disclose.

As the big media kept playing the story, Zager was the only one to report that Brockovich had to be forced to disclose the results—and that her own results showed not what she had claimed, but levels close to normal. The number of cancer cases cited—once they were forced to be disclosed—turned out to be exaggerated also. Zager also learned that the producer of the original KCBS segment that started the panic turned out to be a friend whose campaign for the Thousand Oaks city council Masry had contributed to.

This spring, the Beverly Hills case ground on unresolved, with a new investigation by a district attorney added to the ongoing civil suits. But the coverage seems to have abated some, and there is no settlement in sight. ■

"Muckraker 90210: A Most Unlikely Reporter Nails Erin Brockovich," Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 2004, by Eric Umansky, <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2004/2/umansky-muck.asp>

READING RACK (from p. 6)

stress enough that extremists are screaming 'Doomsday!' when the environment is actually seeing a new and better day," Gannett reports, quoting from the February 4 memo. Gannett reports that some Republican centrists "dispute key details and don't like its tone."

"Mercury As Folk Potion Sickens Users, Pollutes," Bergen County Record, March 16, 2004: How often do environmental stories begin, "The voodoo priest sits in a room lighted by burning candles, where masks and saints, liquor bottles, and a bowl of money are arranged on altars." Lindy Washburn, with help from Monsy Alvarado and Alex Nussbaum, tells of the many uses of mercury in folk religion and ritual—uses that are now understood to cause actual poisoning in many cases. Many voodoo priests now understand the dangers of "azogue" and avoid using it. But others do not and are not even aware of the dangers. Cultural practices are just one of the many ways toxic mercury compounds find their way into the environment, and the Bergen Record's ongoing coverage documents several other common—and overlooked—pathways (e.g. medical thermometers dropped on the floor). One estimate put cultural practices on a par with power-plant emissions of mercury as a source going into the sediments

of New York Harbor. A lot of that, experts think, was excreted by humans. Mercury vapor in indoor air and elevated blood levels of mercury in children have been found in some New Jersey neighborhoods. <http://www.northjersey.com>

"Party Favors: Bush Drilling Plan Ticks Off Many New Mexicans And Tickles GOP Donors Pink," Grist, March 10, 2004: Muckraking is certainly alive and well in the work of Amanda Griscom whose columns of that name in Grist unfailingly flush from the underbrush good stories that nobody else is covering. The story of the BLM's drive for oil and gas drilling on New Mexico's pristine 1.2-million-acre Otero Mesa is another one. It has gotten little national coverage, although it has been covered within the state. The Campaign to Protect America's Lands has called the BLM's plan to drill the mesa a reward for major Bush campaign donor George Yates, whose company has the most leases there. But Griscom also notes that New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson (D), who has made a major effort to stop drilling of what he calls "the West's ANWR," has been mentioned as a potential Dem VP pick for 2004. <http://www.gristmagazine.com/muck/muck031104.asp?source=galert> ■

State of Media (from p. 1)

“Many long-held ideas about journalism are unraveling,” the piece opens, with journalism “in the midst of an epochal transformation, as momentous probably as the invention of the telegraph or television. Journalism, however, is not becoming irrelevant. It is becoming more complex.”

“Quality news and information,” the report continues, “are more available than ever before, but in greater amounts so are the trivial, the one-sided and the false.” The journalist’s role “as intermediary, editor, verifier, and synthesizer is weakening.”

The report details what it sees as eight “major trends”:

- More news outlets chasing a static or shrinking audience for news;
- New journalism investments—mostly for information technology—going toward dissemination, rather than gathering, of news;
- More providing of the “raw elements of news as the end product,” with a tendency toward “a jumbled, chaotic, partial quality,” at least in part because of pressures of the 24-hour news cycle;
- Varying journalistic standards, even within a single news organization;
- A “problematic” long-term outlook for many traditional news outlets, with fewer reporters having to cover more bases and shrinking space in newscasts “to make room for ads and promotions.” A “thinning” of the news product;
- An increased potential that online journalism will converge with, rather than replace, conventional media outlets. “The idea that the medium is the message increasingly will be passé;”
- Pressures on journalism stemming more from economic than from technology forces;
- Increased “leverage” over journalists for those trying to manipulate the media and the public, in part because with fewer reporters trying to cover more terrain, “it becomes a seller’s market for information.”

The May issue of *Environment Writer* will provide a medium-by-medium review of the *State of the Media* report in an effort to provide a deeper understanding of the overall context in which environmental reporting, as a specialty, exists...and flourishes or flounders. ■

Herding Cats (from p. 3)

factual errors from occurring in the first place. One way, of course, is to be able to pre-approve a story before it is published or aired.

This area reveals another point of friction for scientists and journalists—whether a reporter should allow a scientist to preview all or any part of a story. Scientists see this as a logical way to make sure the story accurately reflects their technical point of view. After all, much scientific work is peer-reviewed, so many scientists assume a similar process should be in place for journalists.

However, journalists are concerned that by granting outside interests a right to preview a story, they open themselves to pressure to change a story, not because of factual issues, but rather over concerns of tone, or a dislike of a particular angle. The issue of previewing, then, is still a point of contention and one deserving much more thought.

A second broad truth to come from the first workshop involves areas of disagreement between journalists and scientists. One major disagreement involved whether journalists, while their work may *educate*, are themselves actually *educators*.

Perhaps reporters’ concerns here lie in the word “responsibility.” The definitions for inform and educate are quite similar. But education implies a greater responsibility to the public, and it is this responsibility that frightens some journalists. To many reporters, education also implies sticking with a curriculum, as opposed to simply “following the news.” But whether we call it informing, or educating, the reality is the same—the public relies on journalists to give them the information they need to be better informed.

Another area of disagreement involves the communication of uncertainty, and how that is done. Journalists by nature are generalists. As science becomes increasingly more specialized, reporters are tasked with covering more and more topics. All this means reporters often don’t have the time needed to research and fully understand the uncertainties underlying a particular issue. So sometimes they fall back on portraying uncertainty as conflict.

Scientists become reluctant to then volunteer an opinion. Scientists, meanwhile, have headed in the opposite direction from journalists—they are becoming more and more specialized, and thus less well-equipped to speak to broader issues, while newsroom pressures are leading to less and less specialization of beats.

The final truth, though, is that there is one point of agreement between scientists and journalists. And that is that things can, and should, be better, and both scientists and journalists have a way to go to improve science communications through the media.

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WEBS OF INTEREST

Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page



Wikipedia is a free web-based encyclopedia, with “free” defined as free to use, free to edit, and free to copy and redistribute. As of March 2004, Wikipedia contained more than 220,000 articles in English, and more than 290,000 articles in 54 other languages (from the obvious—Spanish, French, Japanese—to the obscure—Esperanto, Walloon, Bahasa Indonesia, Occitan, Tamil, Swahili, Tatar, Nauruan, Nahuatl, Soto). As a starting point, type in your topic in the search box. A search on “environment” produces a page with a wide range of choices and definitions—from literature to sociology to ecological—each one linked to more information. A more narrow topic choice, such as climate change, brings up a definition and how it differs from global warming with recommendations to also see historical temperature record. It offers a table of contents including climate change factors (internal factors, natural factors, human factors, anthropogenic greenhouse gases, etc.), evaluation of the relative importance of various factors, attribution of climate change over the past century, global warming episodes in the geological, and more.

Following the links of each of these subjects brings even more choices. For example, clicking on human factors, offers an explanation that includes links to a definition of homo sapiens, and specifics on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and carbon cycles. The choices seem endless, requiring a focused interest. ■

