

Theme 4 – Defining What is Possible

Presentation: The Role and Responsibility of the Media

Presenter: Geoffrey Lean

Journalists, as a rule, intensely dislike discussing the ‘role and responsibility of the media’. One reason is that journalism is, in many ways, essentially an irresponsible profession - in the strictest and least pejorative sense of the word. Like much of academia, it attracts people who prefer saying what should be done than actually putting it into practice. Nikita Krushchev, responding to western media criticism of his governance of the then Soviet Union, once said that it was easier to write a newspaper column than to run a country.

Another reason for this allergy comes from a reaction to hypocrisy. Journalism should be an attempt to find and communicate the truth, without regard to special interests. You would be amazed to find how often the promotion of a special interest is couched in terms of the ‘responsibility’ of a journalist or a newspaper to cover a particular subject or espouse a particular line.

No honest journalist - allergic to the concept or not - can deny, however, that his or her work carries huge responsibilities and plays an important role in the communication of information and ideas. Journalism helps set the political and policy agenda and affects the public mood. It has the power both to speak directly to the public over the heads of national leaders and to represent the concerns of the people to those leaders.

This can be particularly true over environmental issues, where there seems to be a strange lack of connection between leaders and the led. I was struck by a comment by Tim Wirth that the US Administration would have liked to have set stricter targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases, but did not have the necessary public constituency or votes in Congress. Indeed, the Clinton Administration did try, early on, to introduce an energy tax only to fail to attract much public support - even from environmental groups - and only to run into overwhelming congressional opposition; and that was when the Democrats still had a majority in both Houses and before the mid-term elections brought an influx of Republicans determined to dismantle the environmental measures of the last twenty years.

Yet the exit polls of that same mid-term election that swept the Republicans to their congressional majorities found that 83% of voters described themselves as ‘environmentalists’. Indeed it was no accident that they did not include their plans on the environment in their *Contract with America*: polls had shown that these were very unpopular. Bill Reilly, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under George Bush, told me just before the last Presidential Election how the Republicans’ own pollsters had reported that environmental concerns ‘had entered the core values of the American people, even in recession’. I remember too how public opinion forced President Bush into a more environmentally-friendly stance than he had planned at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.

It is much the same in Britain. Pollsters regularly find 80-90% support for environmental propositions. Even more interestingly, a MORI poll which measures what people actually do, rather than what they say, regularly finds that about a third of Britons are ‘environmental activists’. Well over four million people belong to environmental pressure groups, the kind of membership numbers that political parties would kill for, yet neither of the big parties appear to have made any serious attempt either to meet these concerns, or, perhaps more surprisingly, to mobilise this latent political force.

Robin Cook, our shadow Foreign Secretary, has called environmental concerns ‘the sleeping giant of British politics’. Every so often the giant turns over in his sleep, causing tremors throughout the political landscape, but soon appears to nod off again. One such episode occurred at the end of the 1980s when seals were found to be dying in the North Sea. There was immense public alarm, newspapers far from notable for their environmental concerns took up the cry, and it played a major part in Mrs Thatcher’s celebrated ‘green conversion’ in 1989. Similarly Shell’s plans to dump the Brent Spar oil platform in the sea earlier this year ran into such huge and vocal public protest throughout Europe that it had abruptly to abandon

them.

It is as if there were a great oil-bearing strata of environmental concern under the normal ground of public and political life, and as if every so often someone, or some issue, succeeds in drilling down into it, bringing it gushing out onto the surface and taking everyone by surprise. The media have undoubtedly played a part both in creating the environmental consciousness that permeates the strata and in helping to power the drill that every so often taps into it - not by forethought or planning, but simply by reporting what is going on.

I got into this field, by accident, twenty-five years ago, in 1970, European Conservation Year. I had just started work on my first big newspaper, the *Yorkshire Post*. The editor decided that someone should be in charge of covering the Year, and as I was a new face, with no other responsibilities, I was volunteered. I soon became hooked, particularly as I came to realise that the environment was not primarily about tigers or toxic waste or even global warming or nuclear accidents, but about the well-being of people, now and in the future.

I was by no means the first newspaper environment correspondent in Britain but I have been the longest serving. A strong, if small, corps of environmental specialists in the late 1960s and early 1970s was dismantled as newspapers ceased to give much attention to the subject and it was not until the late 1980s that editors began appointing them again in any numbers. There is now a strong group again, if somewhat smaller than at its height at the turn of the decade, but for many years I used to meet the entire British national newspaper environment press corps every morning, in the shaving mirror.

It has been a privilege to be able to help define a new journalistic speciality but it has also been something of a struggle, for me and for others. The struggle has been not to push a particular point of view - that, emphatically, is not our job - but to get the environment taken seriously as a subject meriting proper coverage.

For many years, newspaper executives in Britain did not consider covering the environment to be real journalism - an attitude that still persists even on some 'serious' papers. It was, and often still is, thought to be a 'worthy' subject - the kiss of death in a newsroom. There are, I understand, similar attitudes in newspapers in many other countries.

Part of the problem stems from basic constraints in the way the media operates. We are very good at covering *events*, for example, but rather poor at reporting *processes*. So we can handle a Chernobyl or an Exxon Valdez quite well, even though we may not have been very good at exploring the underlying issues that led to both accidents, certainly not in advance. But we are very poor at reporting such ongoing, important processes as desertification, deforestation, or even climate change.

We are much better at presenting *images* than *arguments*, even in the written media. It often takes an image to bring an environmental issue alive. The Antarctic ozone hole - something people felt that they could easily envisage - was the catalyst that sparked coverage of ozone depletion. Similarly, the finding that grasses and flowering plants were beginning to colonise part of Antarctica - another powerful image - was the first story that began to bring reporting of global warming out of the doldrums, at least in Britain.

We are also much better at reporting *conflict* than the process of reaching *consensus*. In Britain, many of our institutions are confrontational - Parliament, the law courts, trades unions and management. The media understands issues that fall into this confrontational matrix and tends to see those that do not - like the environment - as irrelevant and unimportant. Indeed we often report the process of seeking scientific consensus in a confrontational way. Thus having put forward one conclusion based on a particular set of findings, we often seek a contrary view and give it equal weight, just as we would in reporting Parliament or the law courts. This is one reason why the media made such a mess of reporting the debate over global warming, giving equal space and weight to a handful of dissident scientists as to the overwhelming consensus of the vast majority, expressed in the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In part, this stems from a sound journalistic instinct, always to be seeking to challenge established wisdom: but it also stems from a failure to understand how science operates. Even groups that exploit the media's concentration on confrontation, like Greenpeace, get frustrated by it: they complain that they cannot get the same publicity for their work on solutions, like their promotion of their ozone-friendly

Greenfreeze fridge, as they do for their protests over the Brent Spar or nuclear testing in the Pacific.

All this is made even more difficult by the conservatism of the media, which does not easily take up new issues. The environment is a new subject that was not around when many editors and other executives formed their news values. Worse, it has come in waves - reaching peaks of newsworthiness at the beginning of the 1970s and between the late 1980s and early 1990s and declining sharply afterwards - which has made it seem dated as well as unfamiliar.

Then, in Britain at least, the national media often tends to reflect the concerns and views of a limited number of people, concentrated in the small area that encompasses Westminster, Whitehall and the City - the centres of politics, administration and business. The issues that preoccupy this group often seem to leave the rest of Britain cold while some of the concerns that animate the country as a whole often fail to penetrate this inner circle. However, as commercial organisations, fighting tight circulation battles, newspapers will eventually find that they cannot continue to underplay such a popular subject as the environment. Surveys continually reinforce this message. Those carried out on the *Observer* during my time on the paper showed that the environment came top when readers were asked which subject in the paper most interested them, and second when they were asked what they wanted to be given more space. Other newspapers have had similar findings.

Environmental issues will also increasingly force their way into the news agenda because environmental processes will increasingly express themselves as events. This will in turn provide an appetite for knowing more about the processes behind the events. The spate of floods across the world in recent years have forced themselves onto the news pages, but have also led to increasing discussion of such contributing factors as deforestation, the canalisation of rivers and climate change. I have never known a time when there were so many environmental stories around - and largely ones being thrown up by natural, economic and political processes rather than being manufactured by NGOs or politicians for their own purposes.

The media will therefore, I believe, despite all its limitations, slowly play an increasing role in the environmental debate.