

FORESTS AND TREES: JOURNALISM AND COVERAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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Let me pose three naïve questions.

They are the kind of questions that make many intellectuals restive or scornful or both, and which they prefer to qualify, or divide into sub-questions that they would tell us were more precise and analyzable.

I will ask them in the round.

1. Does human history suggest that fundamental, large-scale adaptations in human behavior over time periods of a century or less are possible?
2. Why, in discussing most of our major contemporary issues and dilemmas, do we wind up so often asking whether the media (or the press) are doing their job in educating the public and presenting fairly and usefully the issue in question?
3. Does the short and fragile history of independent news organizations on this planet tell us anything about how they now, or might in the future better cover “environmental and related economic issues”?

I do not believe in unnecessary suspense. Let me give my answers to those questions.

To the first question: Yes. Human history does suggest that in certain circumstances human beings are capable, albeit with much travail and difficulty, of

making fundamental adaptations in their behavior. An example is the agonizing transition in the nineteenth century from a widespread reliance upon slavery that dated at least from the first agricultural settlements ten thousand years ago to the generally held contemporary conclusion that slavery has no legitimate place in human affairs.¹ The gradual fall in human fertility around the world, and in the developing world in particular, over the past two decades is another example. Humans are as likely to underestimate their own capacities as they are to misestimate the nature and scope of the challenges that confront them. As we saw when Christopher Columbus set foot upon the isle of Santo Domingo confident that he was in the East Indies, or when the British Parliament voted overwhelmingly against the introduction of daylight savings time because it would confuse the cows, human history is replete with examples of drawing wrong conclusions from data viewed through the prism of old-fashioned assumptions and of confusing the forest with the trees.

To the second question: we wind up asking if the press is doing their job because of the unique role an independent press plays in democracies. In the modern period it is primarily in democracies that we find the pluralism, the liberty, and the orneriness to raise in the rough give and take of the public arena the largest policy issues that humans face. An independent press is the oxygen of democracy, and without it little of that debate and raucous clash of ideas would take place. We gauge in part whether the public is informed by what is presented to them through the press, and we know that what the press covers and interprets is in part influenced by what the public wants to know. So press presentation and content becomes a proxy measure for the scope and accuracy of public knowledge, the intensity of public debate, and the importance to the public of an issue.

It is an imperfect gauge. It can be a lagging or leading indicator. It may be overall a rather poor indicator of what the public “needs” to know. But unfortunately we have no objective criterion for what the public “needs to know”; we have only our individual subjective opinions. So while it is fair to ask whether the press is doing its job in presenting fairly and in its true dimensions the “environmental issue”, it would be foolish to expect too much from any contemporary answer to that question, because the press acts in part as a mirror of what the public knows or how the public treats the issue, and because each of us compares that reflected image with our individual opinion on what the issue is and means.

The third question, plus the parallel question posed in the invitation to this meeting (“How Do Business, Government and Media Balance the Competing Values of Economic Growth and a Healthy Environment?”) lead to the meat of what the organizers have asked me to address, and I devote the rest of this essay tackling it and related issues.

I start with two commonplace observations.

First, I will use the phrase ‘news organizations’, ‘the ‘press’, or ‘independent news organizations’ to designate that precious rarity among human institutions – an organization devoted to gathering, interpreting and presenting news without regard to commercial pressure or political influence. I am in no way a supporter of ‘advocacy journalism’. And I will not use the term media, which refers to a far wider and less easily defined grouping of activities.

Secondly, the need to balance competing values is not unique to the “environmental challenge”. That has been a characteristic of many, many problems. It is an ongoing and accepted role of modern government in particular and contemporary society in general to balance the competing requirements of health, fairness, civil liberties, security, economic growth, business profitability, investment climate, and so on. The protection of the environment, and more lately the requirements of sustainability going forward, are additional and important parameters in the ongoing ballet of conflict and accommodation. But the need for and presence of a balancing act are neither new nor unusual.

No. What is unique here is quite different. What is unique here is that for the first time in our history as a species, if we do not get that balancing act right – and get it right relatively soon – the terms of human existence on this planet will turn sharply for the worse.

What is unique in this story is that we have entered a period of systematic and accelerating environmental deterioration on a global scale. This danger appears gradual in the time scale of the human experience. But it is cumulative in the sense that – like tooth decay – the longer it builds, the more difficult and expensive it becomes to reverse. And in the geologic time scale this deterioration is proceeding at breakneck speed.

The possibility of progressive environmental degradation has been inherent in the particular developmental path that the pattern of human economic activity on this planet has taken over the last few hundred years. Now the time for this model of headlong exploitation of natural resources has run out. The earth is our host and we are its guests, and we are on the verge of destroying the only habitat in which we can live.

The period of deepening environmental deterioration does not lie in the future. It has begun. There are no more cod in the Grand Banks fishery. There is less fresh water, of lower quality, available in the world for drinking and household use. Water tables beneath the three largest grain-producing plains² and elsewhere are sinking. The world's climate is warming and threatens agricultural productivity, the availability and reliability of fresh water, the spread of tropical diseases, the destruction of low-level coastlands, and the death of some coral reefs, among other effects. Tropical forests continue to be cut and burned away every year in massive chunks.

The scale and impact of the behavior of one species have risen to such a level that they begin to destabilize and modify the biosphere itself. Discontinuous change has occurred before on the earth as the result of geological trauma or external disruptions, such as asteroids, and may occur again. But never in the history of this small planet has the activity of one species metastasized so feverishly that it started to undermine the macro-conditions that allowed it to emerge and flourish in the first place.

This is the unique characteristic of the environmental challenge, and one of the two or three decisive characteristics of our period of history. The question we must ask of the press as they cover the environment is: how will you cover this immense drama in which the human enterprise on this planet will be forced to adjust the basic terms of engagement with its own habitat? Can you find ways to cover it that are consonant with the basic values of independent journalism, and that will help the citizens of this planet understand the trends and choices as they debate difficult choices?

That is the challenge independent journalists face. They are at the very beginning of wrestling with it. Coverage by the independent press of this global drama today has about as much to do with the actual unfolding of this historical ultimatum as the coverage of European politics and military affairs in the first years

of the twentieth century had to do with the unfolding reality of the First World War. Or, to bring this home more sharply, as coverage of international terrorism by the U.S. press before September 11, 2001 had to do with the realities of the terrorist threat that we have now begun to glimpse – but which were there to see before 9/11 for those who looked. There is a herd instinct among the press, even the independent press, whereby editors – even brilliant editors who are bold and uninfluenced in other settings – fret nervously at the thought of giving disproportionate coverage to an issue, or coming at it in a strikingly different way from that chosen by their peer organizations. In the environmental area, we need an editor who will be as bold as Ben Bradlee, former editor of the Washington Post, was with Watergate. His genius was to see what other news organizations did not at first see: that Watergate was a vital issue, with far-reaching and dangerous ramifications. When an editor is right, as Bradlee was – and for a while he was alone in being right – it can change the journalistic landscape forever.

I attach as Appendix I to this essay an imaginary memo from the editor of a daily paper or newsmagazine to his or her news staff to help us think how this might be done in the case of the environment. Because such a memo must be specific, and must be lodged in the historical context of January, 2004, it will appear strangely flawed and inadequate – as in fact it is. It will be marvelously easy to criticize, especially for editors. But it helps to illuminate the difficulties and issues surrounding superior coverage of the drama of global environmental deterioration in a far more practical way than do glutinous generalizations.

Let us move to some Q & A based upon the call to this meeting.

Q: Is the public adequately informed on environmental and related economic issues?

A: There is no commonly accepted metric of “adequacy”. The broad answer is no. If we mean by “the public” the population of the planet, perhaps only .5% of the world’s citizens have some real sense of the immense stakes and danger inherent in the environmental drama.³ If by the “public” we mean the American public, perhaps 5–10%, at a guess, of the 30 million Americans who follow public affairs with some regularity have a good sense of this issue. So none of these publics is adequately informed. An important corollary question is: how many of them want to be informed? Because the press does respond to market demand.

Q: How well are the news media explaining the importance and complexity of these issues, including the underlying science?

A: Again, the lack of a clear standard for deciding what is done “well” limits us. News organizations often cover micro-aspects of the macro-questions: a battle in Congress on a piece of environmental legislation, or a suit brought by an environmental organization against a polluter. By and large news organizations do not in their coverage relate environmental problems and dangers broadly to the present model of human economic activity. Just as news organizations did not, before 9/11, report on the challenge of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction as a pre-eminent and continuing danger to the human experience as we know it.

We have entered what I would call the “crunch”. The days of the free ride, when human poking and digging and producing and experimenting made only marginal or reversible impacts on the only habitat we have ever known, are over. We have passed from the period of “environmental problems” into a race against an accelerating environmental crunch. And this the press is not reporting, and has not learned to how to report.⁴

Q: Can they [the press] be expected to distinguish between mainstream scientific views and outliers, or between disinterested scientists and advocates using science to support a position?

A: Yes. See Appendix I, described above.

Now let me add a question of my own.

Q: Should the press be skeptical about reporting the environmental challenge as one of the fundamental, distinguishing, and decisive strands of this period of history?

A: Yes, they should be very skeptical, and very cautious. News organizations are beset by advocates, evangelists, doomsayers and hucksters saying that their particular cause is the most critical one, that the danger against which they in particular warn is the ultimate one. They cannot all be right, and it is very safe and very comfortable ground for a journalist to lump them all in the same annoying category of apocalyptic zealots who bay relentlessly at their doors. So the root of disagreement here may be

very deep, but very simple. If you do not believe a dangerous and intensifying process of man-caused environmental degradation on a global scale is underway, then you will find the way the press reports environmental issues today satisfactory or even alarmist. If you believe, as I do, that such a process is underway and that if not reversed it will have, over time, catastrophic consequences for the human adventure on this planet, then you will find that the press is not covering this as the enormous drama that it is. I submit that this is a deeper and more important question than the question of covering competing economic and environmental values.⁵

Seen in this light, what is happening is a drama of Greek-tragedy proportions. The dangers humans face are enormous and destructive – and at least now, beyond the ken of their collective ability to understand completely. And these dangers are, ultimately, caused by humans themselves. It is an archetypal pattern: man, blinded in his unknowing, bringing ruin upon himself. (It is in that sense alien to the American tradition, with its optimistic belief in “progress” and the ability of human ingenuity, hard work and determination at the individual level to prevail over adversity.)

But there is another aspect of the situation that is both a paradox and an opportunity. Unlike wars, tax breaks and natural disasters, the dynamics of this drama are very slow, unfolding in a context of decades. The pace is perhaps too slow to excite much human attention or provide the basis in crisis that humans often require to organize themselves for a new task. It is, however, slow enough to allow humans to adapt their systems of production and consumption gradually without immense disruption—if they start in time. And it is perhaps slow enough to allow time for the independent press to determine whether it is indeed a dramatic and fateful chapter in the human adventure, or merely another topical political issue among many.