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## The Press Looks at the Problem of Reconciling the Meeting of Energy Demands with Environmental Protection: Background on the Issues

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THE PRESS LOOKS AT THE PROBLEM OF RECONCILING THE  
MEETING OF ENERGY DEMANDS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL  
PROTECTION:  
BACKGROUND ON THE ISSUES

*Peter Janson*<sup>†</sup>

My colleagues and I did not think enough to bring our wine with us like some of us here. My name is Peter Janson and I am the moderator, facilitator, scorekeeper, or whatever you want to call me for this evening's session

We have an interesting topic: "The Press Looks at the Problem of Reconciling the Meeting of Energy Demands With Environmental Protection." We should probably put after that, "not."

Just by way of background, I would like to introduce myself and my fellow speakers. Emilia Askari is on my right. She is a journalist with the *Detroit Free Press*, and you can read more about her in the little brochure that has gone out which, by the way, I thought read like a good Queen's<sup>1</sup> alumni list, other than, maybe, Harvard.

I spoke to Henry about that and he said, "Where is Harvard?"<sup>2</sup>

And someone else said, "Well, it is not in New Haven."

Emilia is a New Yorker. You might hear that coming through in her accent.

She has been a reporter in Detroit for a little over ten years, focusing on environment and health issues. She is a founder and former president of the Society of Environmental Journalists, so she will be sharing with us some of her thoughts and views about how journalists in the environmental field attack problems. She is also the proud mother of a very young boy and girl. We talked about this at dinner. I am on the other end of the spectrum; my kids are all gone and we are waiting for the dog to die – and then we will be truly free.

Chris Waddell has spent the last twenty years in journalism; ten years at the *Financial Post* and the *Globe & Mail* (those two Titans of the press, both calling themselves our national newspaper in Canada), and then he spent ten

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<sup>1</sup> That is, of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Definitely not in New Haven, Connecticut, where Yale University, Henry King's *alma mater*, is located.

years with the CBC, which is the national network, at least the one we all fund. He has recently joined the faculty of Carleton University, based in Ottawa, in the business and financial journalism department, which means he is a group of one. I think his experience has brought him much more in touch with some of the new things going on, as we look at how the Web affects us. I hope this is one of the things that will come up. He also is the proud father of a young boy and girl, although they are not as young as Emilia's children.

I myself was educated as an electrical engineer and was very careful from then on never to practice. I thought if I were a civil engineer, I would never cross a bridge I had designed. I have a strong interest in energy and environmental issues. In fact, I worked for thirty years for a company called ABB, which at the time was one of the largest producers of all types of equipment solutions for power generation – and that would cover things all the way from hydro right through nuclear and other interesting ways of generating power.

Today, the company that I work with, AMEC, is a large British-based engineering company. Here in North America we are very involved as engineering and environmental consultants. We are, for example, designing dams and, at the same time, doing environmental impact assessments to defend that dam. We actually try not to do both in the same project, because there might be a conflict of interest. However, what it *does* mean is that we really do see the various sides of the story and the issues. So, hopefully, I can bring some of that in when things slow down and our journalist friends need some excitement. We are also quite involved in transmission systems and those kinds of things, which people think of energy as power plants. The real issue is not power plants, per se; rather, the issue is how you generate the power and deliver it to the user.

What we are looking for this evening is an interactive session. It is going to be led by our two speakers, facilitated by myself and hopefully joined by you.

First, though, I will outline some of my own thoughts on the energy/environment issue and the role or dilemma of the press.

I think we can all understand that any energy project will have environmental as well as social and economic impacts. The challenge, then, is to balance these impacts and to objectively determine the relative value of the environmental, social and economic costs of these different impacts. I believe that the press or the media is too often unbalanced in its assessment and presentation of those impacts. This imbalance causes distortions in society's priorities, so, for example, it could mean massive investment in some environmental area where we are getting into an area of diminishing returns, and we take money away from other areas such as health, education or poverty alleviation.

In many cases, the causes are good, but we end up with unintended consequences. I take the view that nuclear power generation could be a case in point. I think hysteria caused massive increases in the costs of building the plants, which every one of us ended up paying for because these were regulated utilities. Some of the suppliers made a ton of money, which was not right. Furthermore, we ended up dramatically reducing the investment in the technological development in nuclear power because people did not know if you were ever going to build another plant. We also ended up with maintaining or building other fossil fuel plants and living with increased air pollution. Simply put, these are very complex issues. The fact that this can happen is perhaps not too surprising, as the press has a vital role to play and, to survive, it must sell papers.

Energy supply issues and the eye-glazing science around them are often regional or global in nature. The press, on the other hand, is essentially local, and I think it must find and focus on local impacts for its stories that will generate local interest and sell papers. To attract attention, they often have to tap into our local sets of Doomsday beliefs by exaggerating risks and impacts.

If we look at the media, I see a continuum of sorts. You have the press, the printed newspapers, and radio probably, which are generally quite local, and maybe getting a little bit more regional; then you get into television and national networks. As you go from regional up to national, you will end up with the larger networks, or some of the broad magazines, that will cover the whole country and that have little interest in some of the more local issues. We can look at it internationally with CNN and magazines like the *Economist*. As we move up the scale, it becomes increasingly difficult to attract attention. Then you have the global medium being the World Wide Web, where, all of the science, both good and bad, is accessible to everybody, whether they are competent, to be able to discern between the good and the bad, or not. I think there is a massive change going on in the approaches to some of these areas that we do not really understand. I think we will hear some of that coming from Chris a little later.

What are the implications of that? How the issues are portrayed in the media is also a reflection of society's values. In a local area, you may have health as a critical issue. I would suggest that, perhaps, health is more of an issue in Canada than it is in the U.S., where you tend to look at things, perhaps, from more of an economics perspective. On the other hand, Canadians typically are a little more conscious of society's rights. In contrast, in the U.S., we are more focused on individual rights.

In my opinion, a possible solution is technology and technology development. There are many things that technology can help us achieve. We talk about solar fuel cells, wind power, and every one of them has impacts. Wind power might be great because it is free and nobody cares.

Well, the bird that hit the wind vein cares. Not only that, wind farms generate a lot of noise.

There are many issues that come back to either being societal or environmental impacts. That sets a little bit of a platform. If you want to pay attention to that, fine, if you do not, that is fine, too. I will ask Emilia to say a few words and then we will move on to Chris.