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THE PRESS LOOKS AT THE PROBLEM OF RECONCILING THE
MEETING OF ENERGY DEMANDS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION:
A CANADIAN JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE

Christopher Waddell[†]

I guess I should start with my story about Peter Janson, too. I was sitting at home last Friday night and I got a phone call from Peter, who said, "I am going to be the moderator of your panel." I was just about to tell him that I just finished the first draft of my speech and I thought it was going to be about twenty minutes long.

He told me, "Well, I think you have five minutes."

I said, "Okay," because, being a journalist (or former journalist), what I will do is squeeze the twenty minutes into five and see how long it actually takes.

Then I come, only to have Peter steal my line, which was the answer to the question, "The Press Looks at the Problems of Reconciling the Meeting of Energy Demands with Environmental Protection." All I can say is that, in Canada at least, the answer is, no, it does not. There are a variety of reasons why this has happened and I thought I would try to walk you through some of those reasons tonight. For one thing, energy and the environment are usually covered in Canada as separate issues, completely divorced from each other.

I should say a couple of general caveats. Obviously, I am speaking in generalizations. There are people that do a very good job and people who do not. There has been some great work done, some work that is not as good; so as with everything, there are the good and the bad, and I will come back with some of that a little bit later.

Generally, the coverage at best reflects one side of the issue. More often than not, the coverage is superficial; it often focuses on conflict. Often it does not do much to really enlighten the public or the readers about the issues and the public policy decisions that reconciling energy demands and environmental protection require. There are reasons for that. It is not all just that reporters are bad or are biased; rather, a lot of it has to do with the way

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the media is institutionally structured and how it goes about doing things. I thought it might be valuable to walk you through a little bit of that and try to explain what some of those things are. I will then propose some solutions that may at least start to address some of these problems.

THE STRUCTURE OF NEWSGATHERING ORGANIZATIONS

Newsrooms are organized around “beats” to structure the information that comes in; each reporter is assigned to a beat. In Canada in the 1980s, there were quite a few environment reporters. Many news organizations had an environment beat, because “the environment” was an issue about which many people in our audience were interested. However, during the recession of the early 1990s, many media outlets did away with their environment beats. This was in part because the managers saw the environment as a beat that they could combine and merge into other beats. Newspapers were cutting back; some are doing so even today. Energy issues, to the degree in which they are covered, get very spotty news coverage; in some cases, an energy story is incorporated into the coverage of a company’s activities in the newspaper’s business section. Therefore, in essence, the degree to which either is covered is mostly sporadic.

This trend can be seen in respect to television news as well. For example, the CBC used to have an environment reporter; it does not anymore. Because of cuts and shrinking staffs and growing demands for reporting on other issues, environmental reporting was sacrificed.

The advantages of having beat reporters, or at least *good* beat reporters, are that they have an opportunity to learn more about the issue, talk to people, find stories, and report on stories, and they need not respond to the hot issue or controversy-of-the-day.

What has actually happened in much of the news media around Canada is that they eliminated beat reporters, and the environment stories get lumped into what is called “general assignment.” The reporter who is assigned to write that story could be someone who, only a day earlier, was covering a court case or a fire or something else. Unfortunately, the level of background and knowledge that many of the reporters who typically write environmental stories have is quite small. I will talk about the implications of that in a couple of minutes.

The other way the newspaper or any news organization is structured – in the true spirit of competition – is have more people pitching stories to the editors of the publication or the television program than there is space or time to fill. Selling stories to your editors is a big issue, because they are the gatekeepers who will be able to choose the stories they like and reject the ones they do not. Since many environmental stories are not quantifiable in

the same way as an event that has already taken place, reporters find that these stories difficult to sell to their editors.

THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH REPORTING ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND ENERGY ISSUES

I worked for someone once who told me there has only been one news story in the Twentieth Century: Man Walked on the Moon. Everything else has happened before. That is an extreme view to take of news, but that is certainly one interpretation of what news is. However, the news also is anything that is interesting, that affects a lot of people, or that is important and usually something that is true, too – at least that is certainly the goal.

The Difficulty of the Media to Quantify “Change”

One of the major problems for the media is that stories about “change” cannot be covered very well. The media does not have a very good way of addressing and dealing with change for a variety of reasons. Television is even worse, because “change” is, at best, an abstract concept. As we have discussed today and as we will continue to discuss for the rest of the weekend, there are different views of where the change is going to happen or what the ultimate result of any measure or proposed measure is going to be. The media is not good at “concretizing” that – if that is a word, and it probably is not¹ – as television is a concrete medium. Television is not an abstract medium, and it needs concrete things in order to convey a message. It is hopeless in dealing with most of those stories where you do not know what the outcome is going to be. The one thing that television does well is dealing with a story after it has happened, and you have all seen those stories of the dead fish in the river after the chemical spill or of a drought at the end of the summer and the farmer walking through dead fields.

The problem is that stories about change often have little in them that you can quantify and nail down in that fashion. Sometimes you can do this, but sometimes you cannot. Certainly the fourth or fifth time you are going to your editors to tell them that you want to do another story about climate change, they are going to ask you, what has changed from the last three stories that you wrote, so why would we want to put this in the newspaper or on television as news? That is when you start to run into problems.

In many cases, the story is quite complicated. It often involves numbers and science. Television and newspapers, as I said, do not handle those sorts of stories particularly well, for both structural reasons and for other reasons, which I will come to in a minute.

¹ It is a word. See WEBSTER’S NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 232 (1979).

Lack of Experienced Environment or Energy “Beat” Reporters

What happens in many of these stories is that the media has abandoned the attempt to have beat reporters who have knowledge, background or experience in the subject matter. So, they are increasingly sending out “general-assignment” reporters, who trying to cover *something*. Almost *anything* can be turned into news story that involves “conflict,” so more often than not, that is what you end up running.

One of the kinds of conflict that is often held up to the level of “news” is what other people writing about the media have called “dueling scientists.”² That is, a reporter covering a story will present one person who tells the readership or the viewers his or her point of view and then another person comes in who presents another opinion, and the reader or viewer gets to decide which person is right.

As with every other business, there are both good and bad reporters; there are reporters who were diligent and those who are not so diligent; there are reporters who are conscientious, and those who are not. The one thing that you can say is a constant is that reporters who do not have any knowledge or background of the complicated issues that they are asked to address, especially when dealing with environmental or energy matters, are way behind the curve and are in big trouble even before they go at the door in the morning.

The media is a very curious business. I think most people would tell you that, most businesses and industries in virtually any sector would not survive these days if they did not spend a lot of money on research and development. That seems to be a constant in much of the industrial world and in almost anywhere else. In the newspaper and television businesses and in the media in general, the R&D almost exclusively involves educating your reporters and making them smarter and more knowledgeable. The media, in Canada is abysmal at doing that. The media’s response, in most circumstances is not to do it. The second level of response usually tends to be something like “there are enough young people who want to come in, so if you are not happy here, you can go get a job doing something else.” After all, there is always a pool of unskilled labor at the bottom for which they do not have to pay as much money, so if a reporter is not happy that his or her stories are not running, he or she can get a job elsewhere.

What is the effect of that attitude? I will use my own experience as an example. Only a week before the National Energy Program came into being, I started at the *Financial Post* (for those Canadians who remember the

² See, e.g., CAROL L. ROGERS, LISTENING TO AUDIENCES FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION 15 (1998), available at http://www.kommwiss.fu-berlin.de/~wissjour/studium/pcst98/Paper_pdf/rogers.pdf.

Financial Post, it was in the days it was a broad-sheet weekly) as an energy reporter. I learned a lot about the energy business very quickly. In 1986, while I was in Ottawa, I covered the softwood lumber controversy. Even though it was 15 years ago the first time it went around, it is the same story with some of the same actors. Max Backus³ is still around, and some of the other parties are still with us. There are new voices in front of the Coalition for Fair Lumber,⁴ whatever it is called. Nevertheless, the issues remain the same. The owners of the Canadian media – and I suspect that it is probably true in the United States (it is different to some extent in the United States; we will talk about that later) – do not place very much value on that experience. As I said, there are always new people and young people at the bottom end; you go through cycles, and the experience washes out.

Tied to that, there is another problem that reporters face, and it is becoming a much larger problem. Let us say that you have a reporter who does mostly “general assignment” work and does not have any specialized knowledge or experience and has not been given the opportunity to develop one. Where do they get their information when they are handed a story in the morning and have to go out and do it?

There are several places they can get information. It used to be that you would go into the library and dig up some files (reporters may still do that, if they work at a newspaper or a television station that maintains a library), but now you would probably do what everyone else does: look on the Internet and go to Google⁵ or some other search engine. On one level, that is fantastic. You can now sit at home at ten at night and get studies, reports or anything else that has been written about your topic (if you want to do that and take the time to read them). But what if you received the assignment at ten in the morning and the news conference is at eleven, and you have to be back at two to write because your story has to be done by three because they want to take the version of it and put it on the Web at four – and *then* they want to have the piece in an early edition of the paper at five, *and* if you happen to work for a television station, will you be on the air at five-thirty, please, to talk to about it? What you do is you pick it up off the Internet – the virtue of it: you can find good, primary sources of information or you can read what everyone else has written before. The difficulty with reading what everyone else has written before is akin to the “telephone game,” writ large, where everyone sits in a circle and you whisper something to the first person and you wait and see when it comes back around to you what people have actually been saying. It has its advantages and its disadvantages. You are

³ That is, Senator Max Backus, D-Mont.

⁴ That is, Coalition for Fair Lumber Imports, whose website is at <http://www.fairlumbercoalition.org> (last visited June 11, 2002).

⁵ Google, <http://www.google.com> (Internet search engine).

asking general assignment reporters to use sophisticated analysis to sort through all of the information they receive, and they simply do not have the background and knowledge to do that.

Then they run up against the next big problem in dealing with environmental stories and that is that there are many vested interests that are in play that a reporter has to try to sort out and find out who is telling the truth and who is not. Who are the people with vested interests? The scientists have vested interests; after all, they are receiving contracts for research and if they are not talking or not trying to justify their existence, or if they are not out in the media, they may be worried that future contracts will be threatened. Government officials have vested interests too. They want to prove they are being good stewards of the environment or that they are on top of the issues and are doing the right things. Corporations and their spokesmen have interests to protect as well. They want to demonstrate that they are being good corporate citizens in their environmental stewardship programs, whether they are or not. Even the environmental public interest and lobby groups have interests at stake as well, because they are relying on the financial contributions from people at home and from everywhere else. So reporters have to address and deal with all of these things coming at them from each interested group's perspectives, doing it all under a tight time frame, and often with very little in the way of knowledge that he or she can bring to the issue.

Inability to Follow Up on a Story

Another issue that reporters are faced with is that there is virtually no time or opportunity taken for any follow-up. Hardly anybody ever goes back two months later to find out whether what the people said on each side of the issue turned out to be correct, whether the government official spoke the truth or if what the company spokesman said was right or whether it was the environmental group that proved correct. It all sits there and everyone goes on to the next issue.

I have tried to quickly paint a picture that I think is not very encouraging. As I said before, despite all of the problems, there are good people doing good work. There are many conscientious reporters. There are news organizations that do spend the money to give their reporters the opportunity to acquire the training they need in order to deal with complicated scientific and technical matters competently, but there are not enough of them, and that number is getting smaller.

SOLUTIONS

Having said that, let me quickly throw out three things to think about. The first is an aside (it will be interesting, although someone reminded me the other night that this is not a news story). In Ontario this past week, with the new premier installed, they have rearranged all the cabinet portfolios and they have put energy and environment under the same person and in one ministry.⁶ It will be interesting to see how the media covers that or if the fact that the two ministries are now combined will lead the media to link the stories more. I am not sure but it is interesting to watch.

Reporter Training

If you look at possible solutions, I think the most important of these is that the media companies must spend time and money on training reporters and giving reporters the opportunity to learn and understand the issues. I cannot stress this enough. Once the reporters have the education, they then have the confidence to move beyond talking to the “usual suspects” on stories. They know more; they can go out and find different people with whom to talk. They can hear different things. Once they have developed some sophistication in analysis, they know how to sort through all of the information, which will enable them to be better reporters. It also gives them the ability to deal with primary sources, whether they are from the scientific community or from just reading studies.

Increased Accessibility to Experts in the Field

Second of all, scientists have a big role to play in all of this because science, as with many other things that reporters cover, can quickly devolve into jargon and incomprehensible discussions. People who are involved in working in the field of energy and the environment and deal with these issues have a degree of obligation. I know it is terrible sometimes because you think you are dealing with someone who is not very smart on the other end of the phone and you have to take the time to explain things in a simple, straightforward fashion, and, even still, the reporter may get it wrong. If you are dealing with a reporter, at some point you have to make a decision that if they get it wrong too many times, you do not want to talk to that person. There are many reasons why the reporter might get it wrong. It does not mean that they have preconceived notions, that they are stupid, or that they have an ax to grind.

⁶ See *Eves Put Friendly “New Face” on Cabinet*, *GLOBE & MAIL*, April 16, 2002, at A13.

Media Critique by Informed Decision-Makers

Finally, I think all of you have a big role to play, and that is by complaining and making your voices heard when you are not satisfied with the coverage you receive on energy or environmental issues, whether it is on television or in newspapers. I say that for a very specific reason: because I think, in the current world, we are moving very quickly to a point where those who are actually involved in dealing with these issues – the elite, if you will – can carry on their own dialogue totally devoid of mass media influence or coverage. After all, you can read your three or four choice publications, and you never have to read the publications that are read by 90 or 95 percent of the population.

CONCLUSION

Although the issues we talked about today are very serious and are very important, the one thing we did not talk about in any of them is that, at some point, these issues all enter into the realm of politics; each issue has a unique political dimension to it. If the media cannot play a role in informing the public about the environmental or energy issues that are “in play” at the political level, and if the public does not understand the issues on anything more than at the most simplistic level, they will neither obtain the kind of information they need nor will be able to make some sort of rational assessment on these and many other very complicated and difficult public policy issues.