

**Bylines from panelist Randy Lee Loftis (from the EHN Archives)**

<http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/archives.jsp?sm=&tn=0reporter&tv=randy+lee+loftis&ss=1>

**Bylines from panelist Kate Sheppard (from the EHN Archives)**

<http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/archives.jsp?sm=&tn=0reporter&tv=kate+sheppard&ss=1>

**Resources; Advocates and/or critics of science & environmental coverage:**

Project for Improved Environmental Coverage: [www.environmentalcoverage.org](http://www.environmentalcoverage.org)

\*Media Matters for America: [www.mmfa.org](http://www.mmfa.org)

\*Media Research Center: [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)

\*Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

[www.Yaleclimateconnections.org](http://www.Yaleclimateconnections.org)

MIT's Knight Science Journalism Tracker [www.ksj.mit.edu](http://www.ksj.mit.edu)

Columbia Journalism Review's Observatory: [www.cjr.org/the\\_observatory](http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory)

*\*These sites offer what many would consider to be a discernable ideological viewpoint. I haven't passed judgment on that viewpoint here, because I'm pretty sure you'll be able to discern it.*

**Sam Donaldson disses the "Ecology Beat"**

Eleanor Randolph, Washington Post, 1989:

[http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-01-25/features/8902280080\\_1\\_beat-cover-half-dozen-reporters](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-01-25/features/8902280080_1_beat-cover-half-dozen-reporters)

**Bud Ward, Nieman Reports, covers the same ground in 2002:**

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101297/Environment-Journalists-Dont-Get-Much-Respect.aspx>

**Mark Hertsgaard reports on the struggles of the environment beat, 1989 (but much of what he writes is still true today):**

# COVERING THE WORLD; IGNORING THE EARTH

T H E M E D I A

**A** FEW YEARS AGO ONE OF THE *Washington Post's* senior editors walked into the paper's daily news meeting with what he thought was a pretty big story. Reputable scientists had concluded that there appeared to be a hole in the ozone layer. Widespread use of aerosols, refrigerants and air conditioners had released so many chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) into the heavens that the atmospheric coating that protects the earth from the full force of the sun's ultraviolet rays had been damaged, perhaps irreparably. An epidemic of skin cancer was but one of the dire foreseeable consequences.

The editor pitched the story for page 1, but *Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee was not impressed. According to one source at the paper, "Bradlee just sat back in his chair, raised his arms and squirmed — just, just — under his arms and laughed. It was inconceivable to Ben that using his *Right Guard* in the morning could have any environmental effect.

"If you're the national editor," the source continues, "and you know the executive editor is going to raise his arms and act like he's spraying underarm deodorant when you pitch an ozone story, you're not going to give it a real hard push."

Bradlee says he now tells this story on himself and adds: "I did not once think if you sprayed your underarms in the bathroom of a New York apartment house, I had trouble seeing how that could hurt the ozone layer. Do not sure I understand it to this day."

Though clearly one of the great newspaper editors of his time, Ben Bradlee was, on the issue of the environment, typical of his profession. "Even five years ago the environment was not in the forefront of our minds at any of the big papers," says the *Post's* national editor, Karen DeYoung. "Certainly it is now. I think people started getting really scared. When people began to realize that



this was real stuff and concerned us now — not ten generations down the road — it made a difference."

Clearly, the summer of 1988 deserves much of the credit for this shift in journalistic, and public, consciousness. It was a hellish season. If you were a farmer, you watched your hard labor hard as stone. If you lived in the city, you baked like a tomp in a pot. But the summer did have one salutary result: It woke people up to the dangers of the greenhouse effect, to the probability that the earth is gradually overheating from all the smoke and soot Industrial Man has spewed into the atmosphere. Scientists had long feared such a prospect. They theorized that global warming might bring widespread droughts and famines, unleashing Genesis-like floods the

world over, as icecaps melted and oceans submerged their shores. But because few people in positions of influence paid much attention, the public was not alerted.

Not until a top NASA scientist, James Hansen, testified before Congress in June of last year that the greenhouse effect was no longer merely theory but fact did the media really take notice. The *New York Times* put the story above the fold on page 1 and gave the subject extensive play the rest of the summer. So, to lesser degrees, did other news organizations. Finally, the greenhouse effect had made it onto the national agenda.

Except for nuclear war — the ultimate environmental threat — global warming is probably the single most worrisome storm cloud on our bleak environmental horizon. Yet for years no one but environmentalists seemed to care. "When the greenhouse effect began making headlines last summer, someone showed me the first article I ever wrote on the subject," recalls Philip Shabecoff, author of the *Time's* front-page greenhouse story. "It was from 1979, and it said many of the same things about what was likely to happen as last year's stories did. It ran on page 42. I guess you could say it took nine years for the greenhouse story to graduate to page 1."

Technically speaking, the media's sudden interest in the greenhouse effect rested on shaky science. The heat of 1988 could not be blamed directly on the greenhouse effect; weather is the result of too many variables to draw any single cause-and-effect conclusion. Hansen, who works at the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, was careful to make this point; his worry was the weather in the year 2030, not one hot summer in 1988. Nevertheless, had the weather a year and a half ago not been so ghastly, it's doubtful journalists, politicians or the public would have listened any more closely to Hansen than they had in previous warnings. After all, Hansen himself had given much the same congressional testimony two

## BY MARK HERTSGAARD

years earlier with no apparent effect. Major reports by the National Academy of Sciences, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology dating back as far as 1971 had likewise failed to attract sustained media coverage or engage the interest of more than a few lawmakers.

Of course, 1988 was also the year when forest fires ravaged Yellowstone, the Mississippi dried up, garbage and medical wastes soiled Fiat Coast beaches and pollution-weakened seals died en masse in the North Sea. Along with such recurrent dangers as acid rain, toxic wastes and ozone depletion, these disasters further concentrated the collective journalistic mind on the gathering environmental crisis.

As a result, the environment moved onto the front page last year as never before. The *New York Times* wended the alarm about the health hazards posed by the

breakdown of federal nuclear-weapon production plants; 60 *Money* splashed a national uproar with its report on the cancer risks for children eating apples sprayed with Alar. Most striking of all, *Time*, in a rare departure, chose Endangered Earth as its Man of the Year, devoting nearly an entire issue to the plight of the planet.

Certainly, over the last eighteen months, the press has begun doing a better job of covering the environment. But as heartening as the media's new-found interest is, it

is not enough. If our children, to say nothing of their children, are to inhabit a survivable world, some very fundamental changes must be made. The success of this transformation will depend in no small measure on the news media. Because of their enormous power to shape public opinion, the men and women who are in charge of the media have an intrinsic responsibility in the struggle to avert ecological catastrophe.

"We don't have time for the traditional approach to education—training new generations of teachers to train new generations of students—because we don't have generations, we have years," says Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute. "The communications industry is the only instrument that has the capacity to educate on the scale needed and in the time available."

**WHY DIDN'T THE PRESS THROUGH THE URGENCY OF THE greenhouse problem earlier?**

The single fact is that the environment has traditionally not been seen as a very important news story by reporters or by their editorial and executive superiors. Even now, at most of the nation's major news organizations, the environment is not considered a bona fide beat. Besides CBS and NBC News has over one full-time environmental correspondent; ABC News only named its first two earlier this year. All this stands in marked contrast to CNN, whose owner Ted Turner's strong personal interest has ensured extensive and continuing coverage. Turner's eight-member environmental unit, established in 1980, is expected to produce a story a day for the network, according to environmental editor Barbara Pyle.

CNN notwithstanding, when it comes to getting their work on the air or in the paper, environmental reporters often find themselves in a journalistic value system that undervalues ecological issues. "Particularly in Washington the big beats are the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and the related issues

on Capitol Hill," says David Godler, who covered environmental issues for the Associated Press for four years before joining Environmental Action, an advocacy group, in 1988. "I think the greenhouse effect and CFCs are a hell of a lot more important to the future of the world than the U.S. budget deficit. I don't want to say the *Times* and *Post* aren't doing a good job, though I'd say the *Times* is doing a better job. But at both papers the environmental reporters are competing for space against whatever this week's diplomatic crisis is."

The *Times* and the *Post* are the two most politically powerful newspapers in the country, not simply because they are read by the movers and shakers in Washington, but because their coverage tends to shape the news agenda of the networks and the rest of the press as well. Stories the *Times* and the *Post* don't carry have little chance of reaching a national audience. Environmental stories in

particular have often suffered this fate, largely because both papers were until recently run by editors who were not exactly ardent ecologists.

Nevertheless, even those disgraced by Ben Bradlee's previous attitude say he has "turned around a lot in the last year," following a trip to Brazil with a group of U.S. senators. National editor DeYoung stresses that the *Post* recently beefed up its environmental staff to three people and, for the first time, hired a full-time reporter on energy policy. "There's much

greater receptivity now to putting those stories on the front page," she says.

Despite these reforms, environmentalists consistently rate the *Times* as superior to the *Post*, singling out the *Times'* Shabecoff as the main reason. Shabecoff modestly explains that he enjoys one major advantage over his competitors: He's been working this beat for more than ten years now. "These are complex issues," he says. "But the turnover of environmental reporters at most news organizations is very rapid. Except for Mary Hager at *Newsweek*, there's nobody that's been on the beat more than three or four years. You really can't do it that way. You have to build up a storehouse of knowledge."

Shabecoff's career at the *Times* has not been without frustrations, however. One of them was Alie Rosenthal, the editor who ran the paper for seventeen years prior to his retirement in 1986. Shabecoff, while declining to comment on Rosenthal directly, acknowledges that during Rosenthal's tenure the environment "quite obviously was not treated as an issue of equal import to national security or the economy, and it did take a quantum leap in coverage after Max [Frankel] became editor. . . . I remember having written a long article about the role of the World Bank and other financial institutions in contributing to environmental degradation in third-world countries through their lending practices. That story languished unpublished for a year, because it didn't fit any of the normal news categories. The week Max took over, it was at the top of page 1."

It was under Frankel in 1988 that the *Times* published its long-running exposé of the nuclear-weapon industry. The investigative pieces revealed that production facilities run by Du Pont and other corporate contractors for the Department of Energy had leaked millions of gallons of radioactive waste into surrounding land and water supplies. Certainly, no one could complain that this story was underplayed. Keith Schneider, the principal reporter on the investigation, notes that in the three months fol-

lowing the initial four-part, front-page series, he and five other *Times* reporters "wrote over 100 stories on this, and we still are, and it's still getting on our front page." Schneider does admit, however, that what accounted for the story's big pay was not so much the health and environmental hazards as "the fact that this had a national-security angle."

The troubling question is, why did it take the national press so long to recognize this story in the first place? As Peter D'Amico of the environmental organization Greenpeace observes: "Nobody in the press paid any attention to the weapons plants until the *Times* made something of a crusade about it. I'm glad they did, but why couldn't that story stand on its own? All those problems existed ten years ago, but nobody knew about it except about 200,000 environmentalists, who couldn't get anyone in the press to listen to them."

**NOW THAT THE ENVIRONMENT IS A HOT ISSUE, THE former newsmen within the press seem to be grossly ill at ease with the ecologically minded political parties that have sprung up in Europe and elsewhere over the past decade. As it happens, the green parties espouse some pretty radical political ideas. Not only do they unconditionally oppose nuclear power plants and armaments, but they also challenge the entire ideology of modern industrial society. They strongly reject the conventional equation of economic growth with prosperity and regard technological progress as an affront. They advocate a complete retooling of the economy in deference to the environment. In short, although they often work within the system, they are revolutionaries.**

Yet now that it's smart politics to do so, any politician who pays lip service to environmental concerns gets labeled a green by the press. *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times* and many other news organizations heralded the meeting of the world's seven biggest industrial powers in Paris this July as "the Green Summit," despite the fact that the assembled heads of government stood for everything real greens oppose and produced an environmental agreement woefully short on concrete action.

The *New York Times Magazine* used the same gimmick a few weeks later in a cover story on the EPA administrator, William Reilly, titled "Greening the White House." Proclaiming that "the fourth new environmental chief speaks softly—but he obviously has the president's ear," the *Times* piece was but one of many mainstream news stories in recent months to accept the absurd notion that George Bush is an environmentalist. This is the same Bush who, as vice president, served in the most environmentally hostile administration of the modern era. In fact, Bush was a key player in Ronald Reagan's egregious assaults on the environment.

As chairman of the President's Task Force on Regulatory Relief, Bush oversees the repeal or weakening of federal standards governing auto pollution, energy conservation and clean water, among others. His chief of staff, Craig Fuller, was an inside player in the celebrated conflict-of-interest scandal in the early Eighties involving the EPA Superfund program for hazardous-waste disposal. Now, as president, Bush remains sufficiently loyal to his corporate past and allies to push for congressional passage of a badly flawed Clean Air Act. Not only does it encourage companies to buy and sell the right to pollute, it also crosses much too closely on improving automobile fuel efficiency.

Despite all this, the White House has managed to portray George Bush as an environmentally sensitive president. "It's called the law of relativity," says Ralph Nader. "He's being compared with Reagan, and all he can do is go up. Show the press a medal, and they'll wear it." And see just the press. The Washington environ-

## Why didn't the media cover the greenhouse problem earlier? At most major news organizations the environment has never been a bona fide beat.

mental lobbyists and policy experts to whom reporters turn for balancing remarks to the administration line have given Bush, in Nader's words, "a long honeymoon." Norman Dean of the National Wildlife Federation agrees that "a lot of the positive press has to do with a collection of how environmental groups view Bush. We're trying to be politically realistic." In other words, environmentalists are unswerving - so far - to offend Bush with too much criticism.

Other environmentalists complain that when they do dispute presidential policy, their comments get buried deep inside news stories and sometimes shut out altogether. "The typical White House story will quote the administration at length and then have one paragraph at the bottom saying environmental groups were unhappy, the gist being that it's important to know what Bush thinks and less important to know what the environmental movement thinks," says Diane MacEachern, president of a Washington public-relations firm that has represented several environmental groups.

Giving the president top - and often sole - billing is a time-honored if misguided convention of mainstream journalism. A second convention that distorts environmental coverage is the media's ahistorical, crisis-driven approach. News is defined as what's happening today, not what might happen tomorrow. As a result, the media's favorite environmental stories are disaster stories, preferably ones featuring gripping TV visuals: The Exxon Alaska oil spill, with its ensuing shorelines and sad-faced sea otters, is but the most recent case in point.

Of course, such events deserve comprehensive coverage. But the overriding fixation on the immediate and the spectacular compromises responsible coverage of the environment. Pegging news coverage only to events means that reporters don't arrive on the scene until after the damage is done. The problem at hand is therefore never exposed until it is too late to do much but (try to) clean up the mess. Moreover, some of the most ominous hazards we face - such as global warming and ozone depletion - have been decades in the making and will be years in manifesting themselves fully. That they are gradual rather than sudden processes makes them no less deadly. They just don't yield daily photo opportunities tailored to the eye-blinking attention span of the media. How do you take a picture of the earth getting hotter?

"There ain't a 'Stop the presses!' kind of development on the environment story every day," declares Tom Winabip, former editor of the *Boston Globe*. "This is not event coverage. We need to persuade the media to cover the environmental story consistently. Sure, it's a slow story, but they've got to change their attitudes about what makes a story."

Winabip's point is well taken. In one respect, though, I think the media would do well to adopt even more of a crisis mentality. Just as Walter Cronkite used to make a point of reminding viewers at the end of every broadcast of *The CBS Evening News* about the American citizens being held hostage in Iran - "And that's the way it is, the twenty-third day of American hostages in captivity," the anchorman would intone - so today's journalists could make a point of reminding people about the environmental crisis that in effect holds each one of us hostage.

Rather than bore us with the ups and downs of the stock market every night, why couldn't newscasts occasionally lead into commercials with graphics depicting that day's smog levels in major world cities, or number of acres of rain forest destroyed, or tons of tropical animals, or plants and animal species wiped out?

"We know what changes there were yesterday in the spot market price of oil, but the fact that many tons of carbon were released into the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels, which is the really important energy data, does not get mentioned," says Lester Brown. "This rep-

resents a dangerously outdated set of values about the use of public resources."

Of course, news organizations could make such changes easily enough. The obstacles are not technical but ideological. To many in the American press, such journalism smacks of advocacy, partisanship, editorializing - all the sins an objective professional is supposed to resist. Yet even within the parameters of mainstream journalism, argues Tom Winabip, "there are legitimate ways to do advocacy journalism - how prominently you display a given story, how often you cover it, how much editorial support you offer." Winabip points to *Time's* Planet of the Year issue as a model. "Nothing had a greater impact on establishment journalism's treatment of the environment than that piece. It was useful, crusading journalism such as we haven't seen in years."

What was remarkable about the Planet of the Year issue was not only the apocalyptic force with which *Time* described the earth's problems but also its enumeration of specific cures. Each section of the report included a box headlined WHAT NATIONS SHOULD DO, which listed four or five concrete steps to counter global warming, the extinction of species and other environmental shenanigans. At the end of the report was a full page titled WHAT THE U.S. SHOULD DO. Some proposals were insufficiently bold, such as the call for automobile fuel efficiencies of forty-five miles per gallon by the year 2000 (rather than, say, phasing out gasoline altogether); others were wrongheaded, such as the dubious notion of developing safer designs for nuclear reactors. But most were steps in the right direction. Besides, one need not endorse all of *Time's* suggestions to appreciate the value of journalism that does not merely describe problems but also prescribes solutions. Call it advocacy journalism, but at this late date we need as much of it as possible.

Nader argues that the press should do more reporting of environmental success stories. "There's lots happening around the country with solar energy they could be reporting," says Nader, "but it's not a graphic story, and there's no official support for solar from the Department of Energy. Plus, it's easier to cover conflict at the end zones, when pollution is exposing itself to human beings, than to cover the emerging displacement technologies. . . . The press is not up to reporting horrors."

It's true the press generally shuns playing a leadership role, though that's not the only reason aggressive coverage of environmental alternatives is rare. Another impediment is that meaningful solutions to these problems will require challenging some of America's most powerful institutions and interest groups.

"What's needed now is an analysis of what it's going to take to act," says environmentalist and writer Barry Commoner. "If you go back to its origin, the environmental problem originates in the means of production. We build the wrong kind of cars, so we have smog. We use chemicals to run our food, so we get water pollution. . . . In our capitalist system the owner of the means of production is free to produce whatever he wants, however he wants. So the quest to improve the environment immediately raises a very fundamental - in fact, taboo - question: Does society have the right to intervene in the rights of property owners? Until the necessity for this action is made clear, the will to do so will not develop."

But as central pillars of the American establishment

themselves, the nation's leading news organizations are decidedly unresponsive to ideas challenging capitalist orthodoxy. Nor do they tend to do much tough coverage of their fellow corporate giants. As Nader observes, "Look at all the stories on the destruction of the Amazon rain forest. Do you ever see the names of any multinational corporations mentioned?"

The question facing us may well be, as Daniel Zwerdling, the former environmental reporter for NPR, phrases it, "Can we survive with the automobile?" But what newspaper or network will press this issue and risk alienating companies responsible for tens of millions of dollars' worth of advertising? Left to their own devices, journalists will intrude content themselves with simply relaying the debate on Capitol Hill, where all sides assume the automobile is here to stay and argue only over how efficient its engine must be. (One brilliant, if fatalistic,

exception to this rule was a recent column by Russell Baker arguing that America can't survive its auto dependence, but it's too late to do much about it.)

It may be unwise to urge the news media to lead the charge on the environmental issue. As *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, one of the few mainstream commentators to champion ecological concerns, says, "It's not in the nature of institutions like the *Times* or *Post* to stir up the community on very broad social questions."

But saving the environment is hardly a noncontroversial cause. Indeed, the public may well be ahead of the so-called opinion leaders in government and the press on this issue, just as it was a few years ago when there was clear support for a bilateral nuclear-weapons freeze. In any case, the press has an obligation to illustrate the dimensions and roots of the environmental crisis and identify and analyze potential solutions. In keeping with this spirit, here are some specific steps that journalists and news organizations could take to improve coverage.

1. Make the environment a priority. Now that the cold war is over, the struggle to save the planet figures to be the biggest news story of the next twenty years. The environment clearly deserves as much attention as the drug issue, another story that affixes no daily news pegs but still gets saturation coverage.

2. Make the environment a high-profile beat, not a training ground or exile post, and make it worth a reporter's while to stay on it. Educate reporters on all beats, be they national security, finance or local politics, to recognize the environmental aspects of their stories.

3. Take the initiative. Good environmental reporting is often investigative; give journalists time and freedom from daily stories to pursue ambitious topics.

4. Analyze the political economy of environmental change and expose obstacles to reform. One story idea: Research the campaign contributions of those members of Congress serving on the committees considering the Clean Air Act to see how much money from the oil, auto and electric-utility industries they've received.

5. Cover America's dissidents, too. Broaden the range of "quotable" sources to include such experts as Barry Commoner. And pay attention to the environmental movement, especially the grass-roots groups on the front lines of the struggle.

6. Remember above all else how little time there is. At this late date, to cover the world while ignoring the earth is sheer folly. ■

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