

Environmental News Journalism, Public Relations and News Sources

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ABSTRACT:

Despite professional norms and ideologies that stress journalistic autonomy, environment reporters retain close relationships with official elite sources, often at the expense of less powerful social actors. This orientation towards authority is exacerbated by the continued growth of environment public relations. The extent and nature of this development is explored in relation to communications tactics deployed by publicly-funded scientists, activists and NGOs, and a range of industry players. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the growing impacts of PR on the quality and independence of environment news in a period when journalists face unprecedented institutional and economic constraints.

1. INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENT JOURNALISTS AND THEIR SOURCES

Important to maintaining journalistic objectivity is the task of getting information – the raw materials of the news – from elsewhere. For this journalists usually turn to news sources: people with knowledge or expertise who can provide perspectives on a news event. But sources are not neutral purveyors of information; they have agendas, and try to construct and circulate their own (favourable) discourses about news events, as well as aiming to keep unfavourable stories out of the news. In public relations (PR), sources have developed an entire industry to tightly control the flow of information; PR operatives try to influence news agendas and coverage with pre-packaged materials such as press releases, news briefings, press conferences, persuasive personal communications, and sometimes manipulative and hidden media management tactics (Davis 2002). Journalistic practice deals with this by

providing reporters with methods and routines that aim to minimize the dangers of sources dominating coverage. Notions of editorial independence are foregrounded (Franklin *et al* 2010: 203), and norms of journalistic research advocate that a range of alternative news sources be consulted to provide a plurality of perspectives (Berkowitz 2009: 103). Despite this, much research into how sources access the mainstream news media has found that official, elite social actors tend to get more coverage than others, partly because of the resources they are able to devote to media management (Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978).

Research into environment journalism has often produced insights that overlap with broader studies of general news production. A Cardiff University study of news about science commissioned by the (then) UK Government's Office of Science and Innovation illustrates this well. By recording what they call the "news hook" of each story, they were able to find from which sector of society newsworthy events emanate: 30 per cent of all stories dealt with University research, 18 per cent emanated from industry, and 13 per cent from the UK Government. Only seven per cent of news pieces originated from the efforts of NGOs or pressure groups (Boyce *et al* 2007: 22). When such campaigning groups were quoted they were most often used as secondary "reactive" sources, and were rarely allowed to set the agenda of articles (27).

Hansen writes that when covering the environment the 'mass media are notoriously authority oriented', and that studies of environment news:

have virtually without exception shown that the sources who get to be quoted [...] and who get to define environmental issues are [...] predominantly those of the public

authorities, government representatives, industry and business, and independent scientists (2010: 56).

Dorothy Nelkin identifies a ‘reverential attitude’ among journalists dealing with scientists as news sources (Nelkin 1995: 98), and others have suggested that specialist reporters’ relationships with sources are too cosy (Hargreaves *et al* 2003). The principal objection to such close relationships is that they tend to mean journalists depend too much on powerful sources with efficient PR teams, something that reduces their capacity for independence, allows sources too much control over the news agenda, and often over how specific stories are framed (Williams and Clifford 2010). In recent years journalistic scrutiny of environment news sources has become even more difficult because of cuts to journalism staffing levels, increasing workload demands in newsrooms, and consequent falling editorial standards (Curran and Seaton 2010; McChesney and Nicholls 2010). As one recent commentator on science journalism puts it, the reporting process is now subject to ‘intense pressures’ (Allan 2009: 281). Such pressures, explored in more detail in the final section of this chapter, have not been so keenly felt in the PR offices of most key environment news sources.

2. ENVIRONMENT NEWS SOURCES AND THEIR PR

Journalism’s contraction in the past two decades has been more than matched by an expansion in the field of PR (Cottle, 2003; Davies 2008; Miller and Dinan 2000). Not only have those in the energy, chemicals, agriculture, pesticide, and biotechnology industries expanded their public relations efforts, but so have public and civil society players such as universities, research councils, specialist science publications, charities, NGOs, and other activists (Göpfert 2008; Dinan and Miller 2007).

2.1 Scientists and PR

University scientists, their institutions, research funders, and those who publish and disseminate their research are key sources of environment news and all of these actors have invested in increasing the volume and effectiveness of their communications activities (Anderson 2002: 331; Williams and Gajevic, 2009; Williams and Clifford, 2010; Williams *et al.*, 2003). This trend reaches as far back as the late 1950s in the USA when the government initiated the lavishly-funded “Public Understanding of Science” programme in the wake of the Sputnik crisis (Lewenstein 1992: 60). In 1985 the UK followed with the instigation of the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS), which marked the birth of a burgeoning public understanding of science industry (Gregory and Miller 1998: 7). By the late 1990s the UK government spent around £4.5 million annually on Public Understanding of Science initiatives which included measures to improve public relations work of scientific institutions, media training for scientists and journalists, and prizes for successful science communicators (Göpfert 2008: 216). More recently, scholars who explore the ‘medialisation’ of science have shown how scientists, in order to legitimize their work, build reputations, and secure funding, have increasingly sought to communicate with mass publics by securing mainstream media coverage in recent years (Rödger, 2009: 453). They argue that growing media coverage of science has been accompanied by ‘an increasing orientation of science towards the media’ (*ibid.*). This has meant considerable further growth in the professional science communication sector with an emphasis on media relations (Schäfer, 2011: 402).

The tactics used by publicly-funded environmental scientists and associated institutions when seeking to influence news coverage have remained fairly consistent over the last half century,

even though the volume of science PR has increased significantly and the online channels for publishing and circulating information have become more efficient (for example since the inception of www.eurekaalert.org a PR newswire funded by the American Association for the Advancement of Science). Science communicators have adopted a set of (often defensive) tactics in order to control the flow of information about science to the news media. Most prominently these include press briefings and press conferences, and a steady flow of press releases from Universities and scientific journals. These 'information subsidies' (Gandy 1982) are highly valued by journalists working under difficult institutional and economic constraints because they package and translate news about highly complex science in an easily reproducible form (Nelkin 1995). But they also present challenges to journalistic autonomy, not least because of the well-established, and carefully-policed, practice of placing embargoes on information (which determine when a press release can be used by reporters) (Kiernan 2006). Embargoed press releases are circulated to journalists and news organisations in advance of the proposed publication date, and this allows news workers to plan and thoroughly research their news pieces in good time. But they also afford much power over the nature and timing of coverage to sources of environment news. In choosing what research to write about in press releases editors, press officers, and scientists highlight some research, while downplaying the importance of other projects (Kiernan 2003). Furthermore, journalists who break embargoes can be punished by their news sources, most often by temporarily or permanently blocking access to future press releases.

In recent years communication of scientific research carried out in Universities has moved beyond the supply of press releases, and has begun to engage more in the kind of media management previously the preserve of political and corporate PR. Talking of changes in science communication in the last two decades, former *Guardian* science editor Tim Radford

explains that the ‘conscious and manipulative media management that was [previously] a feature of city reporting and of political reporting has spread very quickly to science’ (Williams and Clifford 2010: 54). The UK Science Media Centre (SMC) was set up in 2002 in the wake of a series of high profile, perceived public relations disasters for science (most prominently critical campaigning reporting of the environmental and health risks associated with genetically modified food). The SMC describes itself as an ‘independent press office helping to ensure that the public have access to the best scientific evidence and expertise through the news media when science hits the headlines’ (SMC 2013). It engages in a range of sophisticated and persuasive communication techniques such as: relationship management (managing relationships with specialist science, environment, and health reporters, supplying them with information subsidies, and putting them in contact with trained and confident ‘media friendly scientists’); supplying press releases, briefing papers, and organising press conferences; performing pre-emptive ‘issues management’ by preparing materials for release alongside potentially controversial scientific research and events; and by engaging in rapid reaction crisis management when needed (Williams and Gajevic 2013).

As well as raising concerns about eroding journalistic independence scholars have also critiqued the effects of such communicative practices on science and its interactions with publics. Bauer and Gregory usefully theorize such developments when they describe them as part of a shift away from democratic, dialogic, and public-centred models of science communication to an ‘incorporated’, one-way, business-influenced, persuasion-oriented model which they call ‘public understanding of science incorporated’, or ‘PUS Inc.’ (Bauer and Gregory 2007). Promotional science PR can contribute to hype, exaggeration, and misinformation (Rödder and Schäfer 2010). Equally seriously, it has been argued that such persuasion-based, science-advocacy PR militates against more open, dialogic, and

democratic attempts by scientists to engage publics (Haran 2011). It may also endanger long-term future public trust in science. As Nisbet and Scheufele argue, ‘if the public simply feels like they are being marketed to, this perception is likely to only reinforce existing polarisation and perceptual gridlock. [...] Anytime public engagement is defined, perceived, and implemented as a top-down persuasion campaign, then public trust is put at risk’ (2009: 1776).

2.2 Environmental activist PR

Since the seminal studies on source dominance in news media referenced in section 1 further research in environmental communication has added nuance to this picture. Such work has tended to confirm the overall picture of elite source dominance, while adding insights gleaned from paying critical attention to the (often successful) attempts of politically marginalized groups to access the news (Manning 2001). The principal insight of such research is that sources do not simply gain access to the news media by dint of their power and wealth alone, but they do so because of ‘strategic’ media relations efforts in competition with others (Schlesinger 1990: 77). For instance, early innovators in activist news management of environmental issues such as Greenpeace were able to bypass routine biases towards better-funded official PR sources because, amongst other factors, of their understanding of journalistic ‘news values’ such as conflict (Lowe and Morrison 1984) and the need for strong audio and visual content in their promotional materials (Anderson 2002: 9-10). Anderson identifies a growth in the number and influence of single-issue environmental pressure groups in the UK since the 1960s which have focussed on matters such as nuclear power, genetically modified crops, road building, and climate change. She outlines a number of factors in their relative media management successes including: the mobilization of (tactical and financial)

resources; targeting communications effectively; and paying particular attention to issue cycles and policy changes in order to mount interventions aimed at influencing key decisions (Anderson 2003: 120-21).

The tactics used by Greenpeace in the 1990s and 2000s offer a good example to explore the implications of some of these issues. The organisation, in many ways, operates more like a large corporation than an activist group. It has offices across the world that employ people with backgrounds in journalism and PR, as well as impressive resources for the production, editing, and distribution of media content (Anderson 2003: 122). It has employed these resources most effectively in gaining media coverage of spectacular, visually-arresting acts of protest designed to ‘generate public outcry’ and to ‘force [issues] onto the public agenda’ (123). Success at generating news coverage for attention-grabbing stunts and direct action was made more likely by the concomitant ability of such pressure groups to understand a range of different factors. For instance, they need to know what news organisations want and when (e.g. in terms of visually-arresting publicity materials, offering sources willing to go on record and act as spokespeople at the right time, etc). It also helps if they are able to frame manufactured news events in relation to pre-existing policy and news cycles (Hansen 2010: 55-6).

Despite winning continued and often high-profile media coverage for the issues on which they campaign, better-resourced NGOs and grassroots activists alike have often had trouble gaining coverage for their own ‘frames’ or definitions of issues (Hansen 2010: 56). While they are often very good at getting contentious issues on the news agenda, numerous studies have shown that their influence does not routinely extend to commanding a ‘prominent role’ in continued debates (57). In addition to this, the success of normally marginal campaigning

voices is often counterbalanced by a redoubling of communications efforts from richer and more powerful corporate or political players (Hansen 2011; Wallack *et al* 1999). The limited efficacy of such spectacular episodic activist media management has been a factor in many campaigners' wish to eschew media-oriented activism entirely. Echoing social scientists' concerns that publicly-funded science PR may damage the public legitimacy of science, some have argued that the need for media attention can have detrimental impacts on social movements themselves (Gitlin 1980). Indeed, a common theme in research about political and environmental protest suggests the more spectacular the protest, the more likely it is that protestors will be covered in a delegitimizing way (Rosie and Gorringer 2009).

2.3 Corporate PR

Much corporate PR about issues relevant to environment news uses commonly applied and largely uncontroversial communications tactics. But worries over the persuasive methods used by communicators of *publicly-funded* scientific research seem less significant when viewed in the context of the worst excesses of secret and manipulative media management by *private interests* seeking to influence news agendas around environmental issues such as climate change, genetically modified foods, and environmental pollution. Studies have contributed much to our understanding of how climate sceptics linked to the fossil fuel and transport industries have concentrated their PR efforts on exploiting the journalistic norm of balancing sources in order to make it seem like the evidence for anthropogenic global warming is more uncertain than it actually is (Boykoff 2011). We have also learned much about the use of third party spokespeople (companies employing seemingly independent speakers in order to make their points more persuasively), astroturf organisations (fake 'grassroots' campaigning organisations which seem like they are bottom-up, democratic,

entities but which are actually confected and/or heavily funded by corporations to spread their own message), and other front groups in order to sow doubt and confusion about climate research inconvenient to industry (Beder 2002; McCright & Dunlap 2003; Rowell 2007). Similar work has been done to describe and analyse news media susceptibility to spin from the food biotechnology industry (Matthews, 2007; Weaver & Motion, 2002; Fenell 2009), and crucially the tobacco industry, where such practices were initiated and developed in the United States from the mid-1950s onwards (Cummings and Pollay 2002).

Most of these tactics involve (often secretly) putting industry's own message in the mouths of seemingly independent third parties in order to make them seem more credible and independent. As Sharon Beder explains:

When a corporation wants to oppose [...] regulations, or support [a] damaging development, it may do so openly, in its own name. But it is far more effective to have a group of citizens or experts – and preferably a coalition of such groups – which can publicly promote the outcomes desired by the corporation whilst claiming to represent the public interest. When such groups do not exist, the modern corporation can pay public relations firms to create them (Beder 2002: 27)

The use of such 'front groups', then, lets corporations influence public debate (in the media, but also in policy circles) by proxy, and behind a carefully-constructed veil of expert or grassroots concern. An indication of the bewildering scale of such webs of (often covertly-funded) industry spokespeople can be found at www.exxonsecrets.org, a US Greenpeace-created website which allows readers to trace ExxonMobil's donations to organized climate change sceptics, visualize links between the hundreds of groups and individuals who receive

this cash, and drill down into each node in the network to view their remarkably similar positions on climate change. The messages of such media and policy players have been varied, but their goals are consistent: they exist to attack climate science as uncertain, doubtful, or ideologically motivated ‘junk science’ (Michaels 2008; Oreskes and Conway 2011), and to oppose regulation on CO₂-producing industries in order to prolong profitable, but very damaging, industrial practices (Dunlap and McCright 2011).

There is a growing research base about the nature and extent of such corporate PR’s influence on the news media in particular (e.g. Antilla 2005), but many studies have been broader in focus. Such valuable work has so far concentrated on mapping the connections between industry, conservative foundations, think tanks, contrarian scientists, and front groups, and on examining the tactics used to manipulate public opinion and discredit climate science more generally. The media are a central forum for public debate, and more work needs to be done by journalism scholars to help us understand the scale and nature of secretive industry-backed PR on news. One small study of coverage of ExxonMobil-funded climate sceptic front groups on BBC News Online is suggestive of avenues for future research (Holmes 2009).

Attempting to map the ‘PR footprint’ of industry-funded individuals or groups Holmes found 88 articles in the BBC news archive that cite Exxon-funded individuals or groups as sources, only 20 of which disclose any possible conflict of interest (96). He also found 90 stories that contained web links to industry-funded organisations and front groups (such as the Heartland Institute and the Global Climate Coalition) in sidebars or at the bottom of articles, framed as resources for ‘further reading’; only three of these disclosed information to readers about industry funding (96).

The emphasis on qualifying contextual information given to news audiences about sources is crucial. Such research, in identifying that industry-funded spokespeople are used as news sources at all, attests to the influence of the climate sceptic lobby. But more concerning is that (even BBC) journalists seem to rarely inform readers about the corporate backers of seemingly independent news sources, despite such information being freely available. Studies like this can highlight corporate bias, but they also raise issues of journalistic accountability and transparency. The news media, according to theorists of the public sphere, are essential to the process of allowing publics to exercise formal and informal control over elites. They should distribute the information necessary for citizens to make informed choices and they should facilitate the formation of public opinion by providing an independent forum for debate (Curran 1991: 29). If the mainstream news media continue to quote corporate spokespeople as if they were independent commentators their capacity for independence will be further reduced.

3. ENVIRONMENT JOURNALISM AND PR:

Maintaining journalistic independence and editorial standards in the face of such investment in tactical media management has been very difficult. High quality, independent, and (when needed) critical reporting is expensive: it costs in time, money, and human resources, all of which are in increasingly short supply in newsrooms in the USA and much of Europe.

Nowhere have economic factors affected journalism about science and the environment as much as in the USA, where 'large numbers of metropolitan daily newspapers have done away with their special science pages' (Kennedy 2010). In 1989 a total of 95 US newspapers had dedicated science sections (Brumfiel 2009). By 2012 this number had fallen to just 19 (Morrison 2013). In 2008 the cable news organisation CNN cut its entire science, technology,

and environment staff of seven news workers (Brainard 2008), and in 2013 the *New York Times* closed its specialist environment desk (Sheppard 2013). In the UK there was a significant expansion in the staffing of the UK national science, environment, and health news beats in the 1990s (Williams and Clifford 2010: 21), but this growth tailed off after 2005, when a number of key news outlets started to make cuts (29).

In line with changes across the industry as a whole (Phillips 2010: 95-7), workloads for science specialists have risen a lot and this has fuelled a number of problems (Williams and Clifford, 2010: 36). Principal among them is that most journalists are simply pressured to produce far more news stories than their historic counterparts. Eighty eight per cent of specialists surveyed said that their workloads had increased between 2005 and 2010 (37), and long-serving reporters bemoaned the fact that story counts had risen significantly since the 1990s (40-1). This change is partly down to pressure to produce more online and cross-platform news: as one reporter put it: ‘the web is never full’ (38). This leads to a newsroom environment where the same number, or fewer, journalists are asked to do far more with no extra resources. Basic, day-to-day tasks, such as finding original news, researching, and fact-checking stories, are now under increasing pressure. Almost half of UK specialists claim that they now have ‘less time’ to check facts for accuracy, while almost a quarter say they don’t have enough time to make what they regard as ‘adequate’ checks on their facts (49). This lack of time has exacerbated an already extant shift in the balance of power between reporters and their sources.

An important element of the democratic value of any news is that it should be independent. Journalists and editors should decide what news to cover and in what way to present it to their audiences. The decline of journalism in general, and environment journalism in

particular, is leading to elements of journalism practice being outsourced to powerful and efficient news sources with slick and well-resourced public relations teams. Long-serving journalists told Williams and Clifford that their job has been ‘de-skilled’, and has changed significantly for the worse over the last 20 years (12), so much so that actually finding original stories and fresh angles from which to report them has become less necessary. In the late 1980s Hansen and Dickinson found almost a quarter of stories covering science issues were triggered by sources contacting journalists rather than journalists contacting sources (1989). This trend persists today, with only 23 per cent of respondents reporting that ‘most of their stories’ originated with their own ‘active journalistic investigation’; 46 per cent say they are more often than not the ‘passive recipients’ of news story ideas from sources. When it comes to relying directly on public relations in journalistic output environment news has long been susceptible. In the mid-1970s Sachsman found that more than half of news pieces about the environment originated in, or drew on, public relations material (1976). More recently, Lewis *et al* find that 60 per cent of general UK home news pieces ‘rely wholly or mainly on pre-packaged information, and a further 20 per cent are reliant to varying degrees’ (2008: 14-15). They argue their data portrays ‘a picture of the journalistic processes of news gathering and news reporting in which any meaningful independent journalistic activity by the media is the exception rather than the rule’ (18). Reporters often claim that PR’s influence is mainly as an agenda-setter, providing initial ideas for stories and a starting point for later journalistic work. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests it also often facilitates cut and paste ‘churnalism’ (Davies 2008), which means that news stories are increasingly similar to institutional press releases, tellingly characterised by one specialist reporter as ‘low-hanging fruit’ (Williams and Clifford, 2010: 42).

In aggregate, and considered alongside the research into the rise of environment PR discussed above, these findings suggest the prospects for high-quality, independent, environment journalism in the mainstream news media are diminished. It seems that in some important respects much of the job of translating or conveying this news from the scientific community is being outsourced to a growing army of professional environment communicators, while journalists act more and more like stenographers to their sources. This has potentially serious consequences for the ability of science news to play the necessary role of holding such social actors to account. When changes in routine journalistic and public relations practice facilitate such a shift in power from journalists to their news sources, it is far less likely that reporters will be able to play a critical, democratic, watchdog role when needed.

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