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U.S. Environment Reporters and the Business Community

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WRESTLING WITH OBJECTIVITY AND FAIRNESS
U.S. Environment Reporters and the Business Community

Pro-environment and pro-business interests have long been at odds over such issues as economic development. Perhaps as a result, environment reporters have been criticized for allegedly having an anti-business bias. Yet no comprehensive examination of reporter attitudes has been available to help evaluate such criticism. This study, based on a series of regional surveys including 364 U.S. environment reporters, found the journalists commonly used a business or economics framework for their stories. The reporters used some business organizations as sources more often than some environmental groups. The reporters acknowledged the need to be fair to both corporations and environmental activists. Business interests and advertisers were not commonly viewed as barriers to reporting. At a time when all news organizations face increased scrutiny as to whether they are fair, a substantial minority of these environment reporters said they struggled with the issue of whether their peers are "too green."

Keywords: environment; reporter; journalist; business; fair; objective; green

Business leaders and environmental activists have long been at odds over how to best protect the environment while also promoting economic growth. This conflict can be seen in press coverage of a variety of issues, ranging from automobile emission standards to suburban sprawl. Representatives from business groups and business-related institutions have complained that reporters have taken a pro-environment viewpoint on a number of issues that could affect business, including global warming and the proposed Kyoto treaty (Media Research Center [MRC], 2001); pesticide usage on produce (Free Market Project, MRC, 2000); air pollution standards (Bozell, 1997); the health of the national economy ("How media bias colors the news," 2004), and such issues as overpopulation, species extinction, and air and water pollution (Hayward, 2003). Such claims of anti-business bias are not restricted to environmental reporting. Business leaders have complained for decades that reporters, in general, over emphasize negative news in their business coverage (Barchie, 1982; Goidel and Langley, 1995). However, a 1998 study found an increase in the percentage of both positive and negative news reports about businesses, compared to past years, while neutral reports decreased (Ott, 1998).

The question of the objectivity and fairness of environment reporters spilled into public view in reactions to the November 2004 annual meeting

of the industry's professional group, the Society of Environmental

Journalists. Journalists are socialized into avoiding public displays of

support or opposition when covering a speech, a press conference, or other

public event. Here, the journalists – technically off duty at a convention –

gave a standing ovation to a political speech by environmental attorney

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., then a muted response to EPA administrator Mike

Leavitt the next morning. In his online *Environment Writer* column, Bud

Ward wrote:

> The fact is that environmental journalists have a problem perhaps
> unique to their calling: They are battling the perception that many of
> them have both inside and beyond their newsrooms of being "greens
> with press passes," as a former Scripps Howard reporter used to
> say….The fact is that the SEJ annual meeting is the single most
> visible manifestation of the field. The shocking/frustrating/
> disappointing/disgusting public displays of affection (PDAs) are far
> more visible than the very worthwhile internal soul-searching those
> standing Os are triggering among the group's serious and committed
> members. (November, 2004)

Ward, the former editor of *Environment Reporter*, argues that

journalists in the field need to work harder at battling the public perception

that they are advocates:

> Those journalists longing to be…perceived as being more committed
> to the 'j' than to the 'e' in the term environmental journalism have
> their work cut out for them. The remedy lies in the most determined,
> most independent, and most responsible journalism on issues
> involving natural resources and the environment. It's not an easy
> road in today's media climate. It's just the only one that has even the
> faintest chance of working in the long run. (Ward, November 2001)

Bob Lutgen, the managing editor for operations at the *Chattanooga Times Free Press,* says that environmental writers might start out unbiased, but that the environmental groups' public relations are just so good that stories may not appear to be objective (personal communication, December 12, 2004). On the other hand, business owners are very timid about talking to environment reporters, according to Lutgen the former managing editor of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*: "In Little Rock, we had an environmental writer doing a story on chicken plants, but could not get a comment from Tyson. We didn't see how we could run environmental stories without comments from business."

*In the long run the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* dropped the environment beat. "We dropped the beat, but we didn't drop the coverage," said Lutgen. "The issue is very important and [generates] high readership, but it is easier to spread it around so that individual reporters don't get so close to the stories' sources that they become biased."

(move next two grafs up from lit review) Business-related critics have faulted environment reporters for offering a "pervasive pessimism about the future that has become the hallmark of today's environmental orthodoxy" (Hayward, 2003, p. 36). Environment reporters are seen as endowing moral authority on environmental advocacy organizations while at the same time viewing industry, with its focus on profit motives, more skeptically. Steven F. Hayward, a fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, argues, "This

tends to lead to asymmetry in news coverage, with the claims of environmental advocates accepted at face value, while industry claims are often overlain with, for instance, the amount of campaign contributions an industry has given to political office holders (as if environmental groups don't put money into politics)" (2003, p. 36).

Yet others feel that reporters can grow impatient with the "purist approach and quasi-religious zeal" of environmental activists (Dennis, 1991, p. 62).

The news media are the major source, for the public, about such issues as science, risk, and hazards (Hornig, 1990; Singer and Endreny, 1987; Slovic, 1987). Environment beat reporters serve as a link between environmentalists, business leaders, and the general public. They serve in an agenda-setting role, alerting the public as to what to think about (Carroll and McCombs, 2003) and supplying people with most of their information about corporations (Coombs, 2004). Corporate crises can develop following negative environmental reporting about a company, such as contamination of Perrier bottled water or corn gene-splicing leading to taco shell contamination at Taco Bell, especially if product harm results in death (Dean, 2004). But efforts to study environmental journalists have been hampered by the lack of a comprehensive survey of such reporters at daily newspapers and television news stations.

The lack of data about environment reporters may be due in part to the relative newness of this specialized area of reporting, which surfaced widely in the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s (Carmody, 1995; Friedman, 2003). The number of journalists at work in this area is now substantial; one professional organization, the Society of Environmental Journalists, founded in 1990, currently lists some 1,500 members. Environmental reporting "is now firmly entrenched as a key beat in American journalism," writes Paul Rogers in *Nieman Reports* (p. 32), noting that environmental stories won 10 Pulitzer prizes in the 1990s, compared to a total of nine in the previous three decades.

Claims about a potential tilt in environment coverage are based, in part, on subjective analysis of environment stories. Another approach is to examine the attitudes, work habits, and demographic profiles of the reporters themselves.

This study is based on a series of regional research projects (identifying and then interviewing environment reporters at daily newspapers and television stations) designed to establish baseline data on those U.S. journalists who cover environment stories (Sachsman, Simon & Valenti, 2002; 2004).

This project (using the results from four regions) tests the assumption that these environment reporters stress nature, wilderness, and the outdoors over other potential story frames. This analysis looks

specifically at how these reporters handle business and economic stories that might be expected to be at odds with a nature-oriented beat. How often do they use a business angle to frame a story? In choosing sources, are environmental advocacy groups preferred over business groups? Are business groups and advertisers seen as barriers to reporting on the environment? Do these reporters feel they need to be as fair to corporations as they are to environmental activist groups? Do they feel their peers are too pro-environment in their reporting? Is there any evidence that environment reporting is too pro-business? This study answers such questions by using a census, not sample, of environment reporters working at daily newspapers and television stations in 28 states, across four regions of the United States.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As part of a comprehensive survey of environment reporters' processes and attitudes, this project asked questions about the journalist/business community interaction.

1. Do environment reporters commonly use a business angle or framework, compared to other angles?

To examine the use of story frames in environment reporting, the study listed nine potential story angles or frames: government,

nature/wilderness, human interest, business/economic, politics, pollution, science/technology, health, and risk assessment. Reporters were given a five-point scale and asked to rate each angle as to how often they used it: always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never.

2. How often do environment reporters use business-oriented sources, compared to other sources?

Respondents were asked about 29 different sources (eight federal government offices, seven state-level offices and individuals, four local offices, six environmental groups or individuals, three business-related groups or individuals, and academic researchers). The same five-point scale was used to evaluate how often they used six environmental; and three business sources.

3. Do environment reporters view advertisers or business interests as barriers to environment reporting?

Respondents were presented with 17 potential barriers to their reporting and asked to rate each in terms of it being always a barrier, often, sometimes, rarely, or never.

4. Do environment reporters feel they should be as fair to business sources as they are to sources like environmental advocacy groups?

The reporters were asked to respond to the statement: "Environmental journalists need to be fair to sources such as corporations." They were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly

disagreed. They were also asked about the same question in regards to environmental activist groups.

    5. Do environment reporters see their peers as being too brown (pro-business) or too green (pro-environment)?

The reporters were also asked to react to two parallel questions: 1) "Environmental journalists tend to be too 'brown' – meaning slanted in favor of business and industry"; and 2): "Environmental journalists tend to be too "green" – meaning slanted in favor of environmentalism." Again, they were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

METHOD

This study used a census approach to identify, contact, and interview environment reporters at U.S. daily newspapers and television stations. Since there is no master list of such reporters, the study relied on an overlapping, multistep process to identify the reporters. Names of potential respondents were gathered from several sources, including the membership lists of the Society of Environmental Journalism and the National Association of Science Writers, the media lists of state and federal environmental agencies, and commercial databases of reporters at various news organizations. A master list of daily newspapers and TV stations was created from the corresponding year of the Editor and Publisher

International Yearbook for newspapers and Broadcasting and Cable

Yearbook for TV stations.

If a respondent had been identified for a given news organization, that person was called. Respondents were asked if anyone else on the newspaper fit the criteria; they also were asked for the names of anyone at nearby news organizations who might fit the criteria, especially if such reporters routinely attended news conferences about environment issues. If no one had been identified as an environment reporter, a newsroom executive (usually the managing editor for newspapers, assignment editor for TV) was contacted. That person was asked a parallel question: "Do you have anyone who covers the environment on a regular basis as part of their reporting duties?"

The screening question was designed to cast a wide net for reporters who covered the environment as a full-time beat or regularly covered the environment as part of their reporting load. Reporters who had just begun such duties at the time of the survey were included; veteran environment reporters who had been reassigned to other duties at the time of the survey were not included. Interviewers used a 20-page script and conducted a telephone survey that lasted between 22 and 45 minutes. The interviewers included co-authors, trained graduate and honors undergraduate students.

The four regions included 28 of the 50 states. Results are presented separately for each region. Examining results across regions provides a

sense of whether attitudes or opinions under examination are local to a single region or prevalent across the areas studied.

In New England (in 2000), 55 environment reporters were identified and all 55 were interviewed (100% response rate). In the Mountain West (in 2001), 91 of 91 reporters were interviewed in (100% response rate). In the Pacific Northwest (in 2002), 57 of 60 reporters were interviewed (95% response rate). In the South (in 2002-2003), 151 of 158 reporters were interviewed (95.6% response rate).

Overall, 46.5 percent of the 550 newspapers contacted had at least one environment reporter. For TV stations, 9.8 percent of the 346 stations surveyed had at least one environment reporter. This study is based on responses from the 364 reporters (315 from newspapers, 49 from television).

FINDINGS

While this article focuses on how these reporters relate to the business community, two identified job characteristics are worth noting. First, there are few full-time environment reporters working at the newspapers and TV stations surveyed. Instead, most of these reporters cover the environment when a specific story breaks or when they have time away from their other duties. In New England, reporters who covered the environment on a regular basis spent an average (mean) of 37.9 percent of their time on such stories in the preceding year; the bulk of their time was

spent on other types of stories. In the Mountain West, the average

environment reporter spent 50 percent of his or her time on such stories; in

the Pacific Northwest, 53.7 percent; and in the South, 44.2 percent.

The part-time nature of the environment beat also was reflected in

their job titles. In New England, 18.2 percent of environment reporters had

the word "environment" as part of their official job title (e.g., environment

reporter, environment writer). Far more common was the title of reporter,

general assignment reporter, or staff writer (54.5 percent). The remaining

reporters held such titles as science writer, health writer, or specialized

reporter. The same tendency held in the other regions.

A business/economics angle or framework was commonly used by

journalists in their environment reporting (Table 1). In New England, 91

percent of reporters said they used such an angle either always, often, or

sometimes; the percentage was even higher in the other three regions. In at

least two regions, the percentage of environment reporters saying they used

the business/economics angle was higher than the percentage citing a

science/technology angle, a politics angle, a health angle, or a risk

assessment angle.

TABLE 1. Combined Percentage of Environment Reporters Saying They Used a Given Story Angle or Frame "Always," "Often" or "Sometimes," By Region

New England (2000)	Mountain West (2001)	Pacific Northwest (2002)	South (2002-03)

1. (tie) Gov't; 98%
   Pollution;
   Human Int.
4. (tie) Health; 96%
   Nature/
   wilderness
6. Business/ 91%
   economics
7. Science/ 89%
   technology
8. Politics 84%
9. Risk 72%
   assessment
	1. Gov't 100%
	2. (tie) Nature/ 98%
	   wilderness;
	   Human Int.
	4. Business/ 97%
	   economics
	5. (tie) Politics 90%
	   Pollution
	7. Science/ 89%
	   technology
	8. Health 78%
	9. Risk 70%
	   assessment
		1. Gov't 100%
		2. Human Int. 98%
		3. Nature/ 97%
		   wilderness
		4. Pollution 95%
		5. (tie) 93%
		   Business/
		   economics;
		   Politics
		7. Science/ 88%
		   technology
		8. Health 81%
		9. Risk 58%
		   assessment
			1. (tie) Gov't; 97%
			   Pollution
			3. Human Int. 95%
			4. Business/ 94%
			   economics
			5. Nature 89%
			6. Science/ 87%
			   technology
			7. Health 86%
			8. Politics 81%
			9. Risk 71%
			   assessment

The reporters were asked to rate how often they used 29 types of sources (Table 2). Each source was rated on a five-point scale ranging from always to never; the mean scores for each were then ranked from the highest (a ranking of 1) to the lowest (29).

The study found widespread usage of both environment and business sources. Two sources topped the lists in all four regions – generic "local environmental groups" and "individual, local citizens active on the environment." But business sources such as "local manufacturers, developers and other business leaders" were among the sources used most frequently in most regions. The Chamber of Commerce as a source fell in the middle in most regions, along with individual environmental groups. The Chemical Manufacturers Association was ranked near the bottom of all lists, yet cited as being used more frequently than the environmental advocacy group Greenpeace. Environment reporters in this study appeared

almost as likely to use sources from a business-oriented view point as they were to use environmental advocacy sources.

TABLE 2. **Use of Business Sources vs. Environmental Activists, By Region**
Combined Percentage of Environment Reporters Saying They Used a
Given Source "Always," "Often" or "Sometimes":

New England (2000)	*Mountain West (2001)*	*Pacific Northwest (2002)*	*South (2002-03)*
1. (tie) Local 100% environment groups	1. Local 100% environment groups	2. (tie) Local 93% environment groups	1. Local 98% environment groups
1. Individual, 100% local citizens active on the environment	2. Individual, 97% local citizens active on the environment	2. (tie) 93% Individual, local citizens active on the environment	3. Individual, 93% local citizens active on the environment
13. Local 73% manufact., developers or other business leaders	**6. (tie) Local 91% manufact., developers or other business leaders**	**6. Local 87% manufact., developers or other business leaders**	**4. Local 91% manufact., developers or other business leaders**
15. Audubon 71% Society	11. (tie) Sierra 80% Club	**15. Chambers 71% of Commerce**	16. Sierra Club 56%
18. Chambers 55% of Commerce	18. (tie) 62% Audubon Society	19. Sierra Club 64%	19. Audubon 54% Society
19. Sierra Club 55%	**20. Chambers 58% of Commerce**	20. Audubon 51% Society	**20. Chambers 45% of Commerce**
21. NRDC 40%	23. NRDC 39%	23. NRDC 42%	22. NRDC 42%
28. Chemical 20% Manufact. Association	**24. Chemical 36% Manufact. Association**	**24. Chemical 37% Manufact. Association**	**28. Chemical 12% Manufact. Association**
29. Greenpeace 11%	29. Greenpeace 11%	29. Greenpeace 13%	29. Greenpeace 11%

The study also examined whether reporters were likely to cite business groups as a barrier to their environment stories (Table 3). Seventeen potential barriers were presented to reporters; they were asked to rate each on a one to five scale ranging from being always a barrier to never. The results for "always" and "often" were combined into a single percentage and the barriers were rank ordered from high to low.

The two business-oriented variables – advertisers and other business interests – were not listed among the top barriers in any of the four regions. No more than 5.5 percent of reporters cited either business variable as being a barrier to their reporting. The more common barriers cited were time constraints, financial constraints, and the size of the news hole.

TABLE 3. Barriers to Reporting, Business Interests vs. Other Factors, by Region
Combined Percentage of Environment Reporters Saying Factor was
"always" or "often" a barrier:

New England (2000)	Mountain West (2001)	Pacific Northwest (2002)	South (2002-03)
1. Time constraints 42.6%	1. Time constraints 55.0%	1. Time constraints 52.7%	1. Time constraints 51.0%
2. Financial constraints 22.2%	2. Financial constraints 28.6%	2. Financial constraints 45.6%	2. Financial constraints 30.4%
3. News hole 14.5%	3. News hole 25.3%	3. News hole 29.8%	3. Audience's lack of tech. knowledge 28.8%
4. Gov't sources 12.7%	4. Audience's lack of tech. knowledge 19.8%	4. Audience's lack of tech. knowledge 12.3%	4. News hole 17.4%
5. Audience's lack of tech. knowledge 7.7%	5. Need to give stories a "human face" 17.6%	5. Need to give stories a "human face" 10.6%	5. Need to give stories a "human face" 13.9%
6. Need to give stories a "human face" 5.5%	6. Your lack of technical knowledge 6.6%	6. Your lack of technical knowledge 7.1%	6. Gov't sources 9.3%
7. The competition 3.7%	7. Gov't sources 5.5%	7. Ethical concerns 3.8%	7. Legal concerns 8.6%
8. Your editors, supervisors 3.6%	8. Your editors, supervisors 3.3%	**8. Other bus. interests 3.6%**	8. Ethical concerns 6.2%
9. Your lack of technical knowledge 1.9%	9. Enviro. activists 3.3%	9. Your publisher, station mgr 3.3%	9. Your lack of technical knowledge 6.1%
10. Ethical concerns 1.9%	10. Legal concerns 2.2%	10. Your editors, supervisors 1.8%	**10. Other bus. interests 5.5%**
11. Advertisers 1.9%	11. Ethical concerns 2.2%	11. Legal concerns 1.8%	11. Your editors, supervisors 3.3%
12. Other bus. interests 1.8%	**12. Other bus. interests 2.2%**	12. The competition 1.8%	**12. Advertisers 2.7%**
13. Your publisher, station mgr 0.0%	13. Your publisher, station mgr 2.2%	13. University sources 1.8%	13. The competition 2.0%
14. Enviro. activists 0.0%	**14. Advertisers 1.2%**	14. Enviro. activists 0.0%	14. Your publisher, station mgr 1.8%
15. Legal concerns 0.0%	15. The competition 1.1%	**15. Advertisers 0.0%**	15. Enviro. activists 1.3%
16. University 0.0%	16. University 1.1%	16. Gov't sources 0.0%	16. University sources 1.3%
			17. Your 0.7%

As might be expected, these reporters were consistent in their views regarding the need to be fair to specific sources (Table 4). At least 98 percent of all reporters in all regions agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Environmental journalists need to be fair to sources such as corporations." An overwhelming percentage of reporters also agreed with the companion question, "Environmental journalists need to be fair to sources such as environmental activist groups."

TABLE 4. Environment Reporters, on Need to be Fair to Sources such as Corporations and Environment Groups, By Region
Q1 "Environmental journalists need to be fair to sources such as corporations. Do you…

	New Eng. (2000)	Mtn. West (2001)	Pacific NW (2002)	South (2002-03)
Strongly Agree	46.3%	41.8%	52.6%	61.7%
Agree	53.7%	58.2%	45.6%	37.6%
Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.7%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	54	91	57	149

Q2 "Environmental journalists need to be fair to <u>sources such as environmental activist groups</u>. Do you...

	New Eng. (2000)	Mtn. West (2001)	Pacific NW (2002)	South (2002-03)
Strongly Agree	46.3%	36.3%	56.1%	58.0%
Agree	53.7%	63.7%	42.1%	41.3%
Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.7%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	54	91	57	150

When the reporters were asked about whether their peers were slanted in their reporting, their responses were less favorable (Table 5). While most reporters, ranging from 91.3 percent in the Pacific Northwest to 97.5 percent in the Mountain West, rejected the statement, "Environmental journalists tend to be too 'brown', meaning slanted in favor of business and industry," they were far more divided on the question of whether "Environmental journalists tend to be too "green," meaning slanted in favor of environmentalism. In all four regions a majority of reporters said they disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, a sizable minority, ranging from 38 percent in the Mountain West to 46.5 percent in New England, agreed

with the statement. While reporters themselves feel that it is important to

be fair to sources such as corporations (Table 4), a substantial minority feel

that their peers tend to be too "green" (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Environment Reporters, on Potential Slant in Reporting of Peers, By Region

Q1: "Environmental journalists tend to be too "brown" – meaning slanted in favor of business and industry. Do you…"

	New Eng. (2000)	Mtn. West (2001)	Pacific NW (2002)	South (2002-03)
Strongly Agree	2.0%	2.5%	8.7%	5.2%
Agree	2.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Disagree	87.8%	88.8%	87.0%	85.1%
Strongly Disagree	8.2%	8.8%	4.3%	9.7%
TOTAL *does not = 100% due to rounding	100%	100.1%*	100%	100%
N	49	80	46	134

Q2: "Environmental journalists tend to be too "green" – meaning slanted in favor of environmentalism. Do you…"

	New Eng. (2000)	Mtn. West (2001)	Pacific NW (2002)	South (2002-03)
Strongly Agree	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.8%
Agree	46.5%	36.6%	44.7%	41.4%
Disagree	53.5%	57.7%	53.2%	54.1%
Strongly Disagree	0.0%	4.2%	2.1%	3.8%
TOTAL *does not = 100% due to rounding	100%	99.9%*	100%	100.1%*

N	43	71	47	133

SUMMARY

This study surveyed environmental journalists in 28 states in four regions of the country about their attitudes toward business sources and the framing of the stories they cover. The standard limitations of survey research apply, and these findings do not analyze the quality or quantity of published or aired environment stories. The data reported in this study are intended to provide a baseline for future research and establish systematically collected responses from an identified, whole population of specialty beat journalists.

Most importantly, the environment reporters surveyed do not, in their reported work habits, evidence the anti-business bias claimed by critics. These reporters commonly use a business/economics framework for their stories. Local business-oriented sources (local manufacturers, Chamber of Commerce) are routinely used. Advertisers or other business interests were not seen as barriers to their reporting. Results found overwhelming support among environment reporters, at least 98 percent in each region, for the need to be fair to both business and environmental activist sources.

At least 91 percent of reporters in each region rejected the notion that their peers tend to be too pro-business. And while a majority of

reporters in all four regions rejected the idea that their peers are too

"green" or pro-environmental, a substantial minority – as many as 38

percent of reporters in each region – agreed with the statement that their

peers are too green. Thus, many environment reporters appear to be

wrestling with this question of objectivity and fairness.

Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that environmental

journalists recognize the importance of the business community. Their

stories include a business angle and routine use of business sources. The

reporter bias most clearly evident in these findings is a preference for local

sources, be they government representatives, local citizens, or members of

the local business community. Still, a substantial minority of these

environment reporters think their colleagues "tend to be too green."

Whether or not significant numbers of environment reporters are truly

biased, the perception of reporter bias clearly exists inside the newsroom as

well as among industry leaders.

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