

THE DAILY GLOBE - ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE, THE PUBLIC AND THE MEDIA.(Review) (book review)

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71

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"'Television' Promises Mass Enrichment of Mankind' ran the headline of one of America's most perspicacious newspapers, The Onion, back on Thursday, 20 February 1947. 'Drama and Learning Box Will Make Schools Obsolete by 1970', it continued, 'New Device to Provide High-Minded Alternative to Mindless Drivel Found on Radio'.

As we know, things didn't quite turn out as predicted. Some of the greatest challenges facing humanity, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, have enormous implications for economic, social and environmental security. Yet the significance of these issues is not reflected in media reporting. The Daily Globe explores why this is the case in a wide-ranging collection of essays from scientists, broadcasting practitioners, theorists, observers and campaigners.

There's some useful and insightful material in this volume, but there are unfortunate limits to its reach. Almost all the analysis is about the UK; the massive corporate media mergers of the last decade or so, and the implications of these for quality reporting, are largely neglected; and television, which is arguably the most important medium of all, gets little attention in comparison to radio and newspapers. Also, very few of the contributors reflect on the implications of new media such as the Internet, and plausible suggestions as to how to improve the situation significantly through structural change are as thin on the ground as bicycles in a Wal-Mart parking lot.

Among the most valuable contributions come from Roger Harrobin, long time environment reporter for BBC Radio 4's Today programme, who gives an insider's view of the day in, day out struggle to get serious environmental news onto one of the most important and influential programmes in the BBC's output.

The very phrase 'sustainable development', says Harrobin, is enough to send a news editor to sleep before the end of the seventh syllable. Part of the reason, he says, is that the news machine is increasingly driven by a tendency to narrate events and explain ideas by personalising the news according to the formula 'news is people'. Time scales are

another problem. News explains the events of the day, as selected by the professional and personal preferences of editors, and examines their short-term consequences. It is extremely difficult to engage the news machine with discussion of consequences that may or may not result in fifty years' time. Added to this is the requirement for novelty. 'The idea that the world may warm with potentially catastrophic consequences over the next century is an old story -- it may be massively important but, unlike the latest cricket score, we have heard it before'. An uncomfortable paradox arises in which the longer some problems -- such as the burning of the Amazon rainforest year after year -- persist, the less they hold the attention of the media, even though they may be of paramount importance.

Environmental journalists often go to considerable lengths to overcome these obstacles by disguising reports of long-term environmental change as news events. But these sometimes backfire. For example, in attempting to raise the news significance of the massive coral bleaching episode that affected reefs round the world in late 1998, Harrobin invited the UK Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to join him on a scuba dive off a damaged reef. The venue was fixed for the Maldives islands because Mr Prescott was already on an official visit to nearby India. The addition of a heavyweight politician provoked infinitely more interest than would normally be manifested in a report on coral death, and the story ran prominently to millions of listeners and viewers on the BBC. But in the print media the initiative backfired badly as leader writers condemned Mr Prescott for enjoying himself at the taxpayers' expense. 'Once the news line of a story is established ('MP in freebie' -- rather than 'Global Coral death') it can be hard for individual reporters to take an independent media line.'

Julian Darley is an academic and activist who spent six months with the Today team, looking at the way news is manufactured. His incisive and dispassionate analysis confirms Harrobin's experience. Darley identifies several generic problems with the requirements of the format, including a bias toward surface knowledge only, driven by desire to entertain and get ratings. Also, there is a tendency, when the environment is treated as a mainstream issue, to use it as a shuttlecock in the construction of public life as a game or squabble. Reports are sometimes of superlative standard, says Darley, but they are more likely to focus on 'who, what, when and where' rather than 'why'. The producers are strongly motivated to do the 'right thing' but tend to be confined by certain assumptions, often determined by the privileged educational background from which most of them come.

Other essays in *The Daily Globe* range wide, and cannot all be discussed for lack of space. They include a contribution co-written by Robert May, chief scientific adviser to the UK government, who says, in a nice understatement, that 'in addition to the need for greater public understanding of science, there is a need for greater understanding among scientists of the public'. John Gummer, Minister of Environment in the last Conservative government reminds readers how perfectly reasonable politicians, utterly and publicly convinced of the need to raise taxes on fossil fuels, will switch to the other side in the space of a single by-election. Bob Worcester of MORI reports that 'journalists' enjoy some of the lowest levels of trust among the British public, but does not explain the weird

contradiction that this does not apply to TV newsreaders, who somehow get one of the highest ratings. Devinder Sharma, an Indian journalist with a science background, explores the role of the journalist as advocate and watchdog in relation to genetically modified organisms. Paul Brown, environment correspondent of The Guardian talks of the entrenched attitude even at some supposedly enlightened papers of 'we've all had enough of that eco-bollocks'. Cherry Farrow gives a useful thumbnail of the ups and downs in the struggle by NGOs and others to get climate change onto the media agenda for the last ten plus years. Vikki Spruill tells an instructive tale of SeaWeb, a novel US programme aimed at bridging the gap between environmental knowledge and the media with regard to the grave crises in the world's oceans. And David Gee of the European Environment Agency makes a good start at the challenges of communicating complexity and uncertainty.

But The Daily Globe is a dry book which, taken as a whole, fails to address some of the most burning political and social justice aspects of environmental change and globalisation, and scarcely mentions the increasingly important role of independent and activist media. It's a useful but not essential addition to a library on media and society, in which required reading should include Breaking the News - How the Media Undermine American Democracy by Fallows and Toxic Sludge is Good for You by Stauber and Rampton.

Meanwhile, the big guns trundle forward. In a recent editorial recommending privatisation of the BBC, The Economist pointed to the inevitable' economic logic of the numbers, Ten years ago, the BBC had revenues of [pounds]1.5bn. Warner Communications, one of the largest private-sector equivalents, had a market capitalisation of [pounds]6.3bn. Last year, the BBC's income was [pounds]2.8bn. and the market capitalisation of Time Warner AOL, which is what that once modest film and television company now finds itself part of, is some [pounds]160bn.

BBC plc, anyone?

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