

Global Environmental Governance: Whither the Media?

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“The press may not be successful in telling its readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about...” (Cohen, 1963).

INTRODUCTION

These words, written by author and scholar Bernard Cohen four decades ago, could not have more aptly expressed the centrality of the media in initiating, and many times influencing, public discourse. And if that statement was appropriate then, how much more so is it today, when technological advances such as the internet have made nonsense of national boundaries; when the dumping of solid waste in Nairobi River in Kenya affects children on the Australian island of Tasmania; and when a truck rumbling through a Texan field contributes to climate change in Qatar. The media bears primary responsibility for the enormous body of information constantly being transmitted to all but the most remote corners of the globe. In a world in which nations and issues are increasingly bound together, the media is one of the most powerful adhesives. As early as 1994, Dan Edogbo Okolo stated,

“There should be no doubt today that the mass media are the widest and fastest means of communication. They are the main organs of enlightenment...and also molders of mass opinion and attitudes” (Okolo, 1994).

In a more poetic utterance made in the same year, Ifeainye Edward Okonkwo called journalists “merchants of enlightenment” (Okonkwo, 1994). I would suggest that such power needs to be wielded wisely.

The world community is beginning to appreciate, albeit slowly, that globalization (however undesirable some aspects of it may be) is here to stay, and that the future of the planet will be defined by more, rather than less, interconnectedness. Strobe Talbott put it more forcefully (and perhaps more controversially) when he stated that, “...globalization is not a policy or option...it is not something to be for or against, it is a fact of life – something to be understood and managed” (Talbott, 2002).

Although globalization presents many opportunities, it also creates many complexities. National issues are compounded when they reach the international level, not only because the scope of the problems are magnified, but also because the number and diversity of actors necessarily involved in each solution are magnified as well. As new issues emerge, so must new paradigms, new organizational mechanisms, and a new vocabulary to describe them. All of these concepts are

central to the Global Environmental Governance agenda, which, although not a new concept, is still new to many ears.

The role of the media in the sustainable development discourse remains minimal, and its contribution often receives no more than a perfunctory mention in major documents. This exclusion exists at two main levels: physical exclusion, and what can be referred to as “lexicological” exclusion. Although this dichotomy is in no way exhaustive, it seeks to explain, at least in part, why environmental issues have yet to come into the “mainstream” in many parts of the world.

PHYSICAL EXCLUSION: MEDIA’S ABSENCE FROM GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

Physical exclusion refers to the absence of the media’s input from the body of dialogue and literature that ultimately informs the global debate on environment. This exclusion results in part from misconceptions about the media and the role it can play in international debates, especially on environmental issues. The media often only covers environmental “functions” rather than engaging more substantively and vigorously in the debate.

The much-fabled Agenda 21 was one of the first international documents to recognize the media by name. Chapter 8 says, *inter alia*,

“Countries, in cooperation with national institutions and groups, the media and the international community, should promote awareness in the public at large, as well as in specialized circles, of the importance of considering environment and development in an integrated manner, and should establish mechanisms for facilitating a direct exchange of information and views with the public. Priority should be given to highlighting the responsibilities and potential contributions of different social groups” (UNCED, 1992, Agenda 21).

This is an explicit reference to the role the media can play in “mainstreaming” the debate that now confronts the international community. Such reference would contribute to the establishment of an international environmental governance. As such, it was a major victory for environmental journalists everywhere.

A second reason for the media’s absence from the debate comes from the journalistic paradigm. The “news judgment paradigm,” which has ruled the profession for decades (and which will be discussed later), strongly influences the media’s decision to cover certain stories and engage in particular issues. The “news judgment paradigm” in no small part clarifies media’s absence from the global environmental debate.

The traditional philosophy of journalism tends to relegate the environment to one-off crisis management issues. An oil spill in the Indian Ocean will most likely hit headlines right away, while the residual effects on the aquatic flora and fauna five years later will hardly make it to the inside pages of any mainstream newspaper. In the early 1990s, for example, the Kenyan government made a controversial decision to hive off much of Karura, a close-canopy forest just outside Nairobi City, and demarcate it for private “development.” The story never made headlines until 1997 when renowned environmentalist Prof. Wangari Maathai and a host of opposition politicians attempted to storm the forest to plant trees and were violently repulsed by armed, whip-brandishing guards who had been hired by the private firm. The forest, which had long remained the preserve of beautiful birds, diverse mammalian species and forest officers, suddenly turned into a news nerve center, with journalists setting up camp to cover a story that was broadcast around the world in almost real time. University students and ordinary citizens joined the struggle, and opposition politicians used the Karura as a rallying point in their quest to remove the then government. For many, the name of the forest is still synonymous with the political struggle that culminated in the eventual change of government in December 2002. By reporting on this event and its aftermath it made the national agenda causing politicians and other social actors to rally around the campaign to restore the forest.

It is important to note, however, that the journalists who arrived in hoards and remained at Karura for several months were not motivated by an interest in preserving biodiversity, nor did they believe their readers were interested in it. Their stories did not center on the long-term environmental problems, like indigenous species loss and water source degradation, that would result if the development project had been allowed to continue. Rather, they covered the story because of the conflict and drama that characterized the situation – conflict and drama being two of the most important of the “news judgment” values. The traditional model of journalism, whose continued relevance many scholars are now grappling with, is based on what are called “news values.” The five primary news values are timeliness, proximity, conflict, novelty and shock, and prominence, each of which is discussed below.

Timeliness

This refers to currency of an event – the reason why today’s news is published today, rather than tomorrow or next week. This normally fits in well with fast-paced or “hard news-precisely” events this news value typically exclude environmental issues as they are often not punctuated events. When an environmental event, one rising to the level of catastrophic scope occurs it will get coverage under this new value. However, that which is covered is only a small fraction of the underlying environmental problem. For instance, the death of thousands of cows due to drought in African pastoral communities may make the headlines, but the causes of the drought may have been present for many years yet will still receive little to no news coverage.

Proximity

The increasingly global scale of environmental issues is becoming a widely accepted fact, but convincing an editor of a Ugandan newspaper that the United States' refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol is a big story continues to be a real challenge. The proximity problem is especially relevant for the Global Environmental Governance debate as cumulative environmental problems do not sell as well as punctuated disasters. The global nature of environmental issues makes it more difficult for readers to appreciate their pertinence.

Conflict

This is perhaps the most familiar face of journalism, as stories about conflict tend to attract the greatest attention. It is the reason why phrases like, "reacted angrily," "locked horns," "confrontation," etc, have an almost permanent position in journalism. The example of the Karura Forest is again useful, as it seems likely that if the guards had not been armed with whips and machetes, or if the politicians and activists had simply walked away when told to do so, that Karura would have been a non-story.

Novelty and shock

The "unusualness" or shocking oddity of a story is another measure of its newsworthiness. This news value has come intense scrutiny by media critics both from within and outside of the profession. As Charles Okigbo correctly notes, a great deal of media content is still predicated on the "unusual, the aberrant and in fact the negative." This is a problem for environmental journalism because not all environmental stories are negative; rather there are many success stories that go unreported.

Prominence

This "news value" is probably also quite familiar. It refers to the tendency of the media to focus on brand name organizations or celebrity status. At the Third World Water Forum, held in Kyoto Japan, in March 2003, an interesting session entitled "Media Misconceptions on Water Issues" surfaced. Breaking the norm, the session featured a panel of international journalists. They were there not to interview people, but to be interviewed by water experts and other representatives of civil society. One of the most notable criticisms leveled against journalists was what they perceived as the media's obsession with big names. One woman asked the panel why the media was most likely to look for Greenpeace or a similarly famous international NGO if it needed a comment from civil society on an environmental issue. No journalist was able to deny the truth

of the woman's allegation. Even today, most big environmental stories, regardless of its origin, will have several comments attributed to readily recognizable "sources."

From a journalistic point of view, there are several considerations that inform this perceived bias. First, journalists have deadlines to beat and if a story breaks out, it is much easier for them to catch up with the "name-you-know" sources rather than look for smaller organizations whose validity they may have to spend additional time trying to verify. Citing familiar sources that readers will readily recognize is also a way of drawing attention to and making more palatable what are otherwise less "mainstream" issues.

For many years, most editors had little place in their publications for environmental news, pressuring journalists interested in such issues to mainstream them in whatever way possible. The same is true today. Environmental stories still get a raw deal in many news organizations. Many reporters still hop from one story to another – from the courts, to parliament, to a news conference where the environment minister is giving a mining license to a multinational company. Many journalists do not ask the right questions about environmental issues because they are most likely not trained in an environment-related discipline and might not know, for instance, to ask about the results of the Environmental Impact Assessment that is required before a mining project can be undertaken.

However, there exists both the potential and the impetus for change. A new consciousness is gaining ground within the journalism fraternity, manifested as a push for greater numbers of specialized environmental reporters. The trend is exhibited by the growing number of environmental journalist associations as well as by the increasing relevance and strength of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFEJ).

LEXICOLOGICAL EXCLUSION: THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE OF SCIENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE MEDIA

This is what I call "sustainable developmentese." Every profession and field of study has its own unique *lingua franca*. Lawyers have their "legalese," which dominates legal proceedings and the pages of the world's constitutions. There is also "journalese," which greets readers from newspaper pages around the globe. Lawyers can glean 1000 differences between 'will' and 'shall' in the law courts and get away with it, and journalists can employ almost hackneyed phrases and no one thinks twice about what they really mean, because these fields and their vocabularies have long been established. Global Environmental Governance, on the other hand, despite the long history of environmental problems, is still a relatively new field and thus does not have the luxury of employing a vocabulary that appears exclusionary or elitist, despite the utility of such a lexicon.

The environment is essentially a technical field, especially when it is discussed at scientific and policy levels. Because of this, the lexicon used by those in the field is generally technical and therefore not readily understood by people with little or no familiarity with the environment or related scientific fields. A look at any document arising out of any major conference will reveal what looks like the latest addition to the world's 17,000 languages because of the wealth of specific scientific environmental terminology contained therein. As journalists rarely have the luxury of sitting down with such a document and a dictionary to translate the information into a comprehensive and reportable form, the verdict is simple – there is no story...end of story.

The language barrier poses a challenge for upstarts in environmental reporting and sometimes even for established reporters. It also provides an opportunity, however, as well as an impetus, for stakeholders to endeavor to empower environmental journalists globally as part of the overall environmental outreach strategy. Journalists have the potential to play a “step-down transformer” role, which is critical if the missing information link is to be bridged.

A different but related problem is the seeming discordance with regard to what certain words and phrases really mean. Until there is a universally accepted vocabulary that can be employed by all participants in the global environmental dialogue, it is a dialogue that will be wrought with ambiguity and misunderstanding. Although the burden to more clearly define essential terms falls more within academic spheres of responsibility, journalists, again, can play a critical role in bringing that vocabulary to the masses.

During the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, a reputable international news agency instructed its correspondents covering the meeting to avoid the term “sustainable development” except when referring to the proper name of the conference. The reason is not difficult to understand – the agency simply recognized that the terminology has no universal meaning.

Although the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “satisfying today's needs without jeopardizing the chances of future generations to satisfy their needs,” (WCED, 1987) it is not a definition with which all parties are familiar or that all parties are willing to accept. Because the controversy generated by this definition has not yet been resolved, there is a tendency for journalists to either bandy it about in their stories without fully appreciating its meaning, or to avoid the term altogether.

Journalists tend to be unimpressed by normative concepts, especially if those concepts have not acquired greater global legitimacy. Many terms eventually acquire legitimacy, even if they never attain precision. “Democracy” is one such word, as readers associate with it certain fundamental characteristics, even if its formal definitions come in many shades. The vocabulary of the environment and of global environmental governance needs to evolve in order for the debate to move forward. Even if consensus cannot be reached on the precise meaning of all terms, there

must be some understanding about them, and then journalists must be made familiar with them accurately transmit the information to the general public.

SCIENTIFIC DISCORD

The disagreement among specialists about the precise implications of certain global trends and events further complicates effective environmental journalism. This issue is related to the language problem discussed above, but it extends much deeper.

In April 2003, the world's "Greens" convened in Nairobi, Kenya. At the conference, delegates from European countries seriously reprimanded the Kenyan government for allegedly allowing Genetically Modified Organisms (or Living Modified Organisms, as the Cartagena Protocol prefers to call them) into the country. Whether or not the government actually allowed the GM products to come into Kenya is beside the point (the government fervently denied the allegation). What is significant is that the developments that followed from this typify the global chasm that currently exists with regard to the question of GMOs.

Several local scientists accused the European Greens of misleading the public about biotechnology. An article in a locally published scientific journal, "Biosafety News," stated that, "there is nothing as unpalatable as reading about overweight and overfed European Greens browbeating poor African farmers..." (BN July Issue, 2003). Without getting into the controversy of whether GMO's or LMO's are the right thing for Africa this example illustrates the confusion that journalists face regarding issues of environmental concern. The standoff between the United States and the European Union on the GMO question is only one example of how incomplete scientific knowledge and/or a lack of access to scientific knowledge can stall the environmental debate. Journalists can hardly be expected to report "facts" upon which the world's most industrialized and scientifically well-endowed countries cannot agree. Because of this, much reporting stops at the level of controversy (thus keeping with the conflict model of news judgment), introducing an issue, but unable to offer any more conclusive information.

JOURNALISM VS. ADVOCACY: WATCHDOG FOR SOCIETY OR GUARD DOG FOR THE ELITE

The traditional role of the journalist has always been that of a "watchdog." In this spirit, the media has long been referred to as the "fourth estate," a name that stems from an assumed non-partisan approach to reportage that serves check sectors of society and politics. The realities of modern times, however, are putting a serious strain on that ideal. There is still no consensus as to whether journalists should take sides on any issue. Mark Neuzil et al in talking about Hawaii's

environmental reporting, complain that “the media behave not as watchdogs for all society, but as guard dogs that support elite consensus when such consensus occurs...” Neuzil further insists that any media reporting amounts to advocacy to the extent that it brings a certain issue to the public’s attention. Because of this inherent advocacy, it is all the more important that the journalists remain “objective” in the reporting itself.

Objectivity is not only the responsibility of reporters, but of editors and other publication administrators as well. Despite this responsibility, many of today’s major newspapers lend support to a certain political party or candidate, for example. Many believe that “green journalists” are biased towards conservation and related matters, but again, this is generally a bias imposed through subject selection rather than subject presentation. One can argue that subject matter bias is, to an extent, both acceptable and unavoidable. In many instances media has helped to shape the environmental agendas of governments, simply by bringing urgent matters to the attention of the public and through the public voice demanding change.

In the Philippines, for example, environmental journalists took a stand on the preservation of the endangered bird species the Asiatic Dowitchers.. About 100 of these birds were sighted on the Olonggo Island in 1987. Members of the Philippines Environmental Journalists Association visited the island several times, wrote numerous stories and successfully petitioned the government to declare the island a sanctuary for the birds. In Kenya, the media teamed up with conservationists to fight attempts by the then ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), to construct a multi-storied building on the biggest natural public park, Uhuru Park, in Nairobi. Despite the absence of a vibrant environmental journalism group, the publication of pictures of police harassing protesting activists helped to exert sufficient domestic and international pressure to force the government to capitulate. Similar pressure was brought to bear on the Bangladeshi government at the initiative of the Asia Pacific Forum of Environmental Journalists against the construction of a Non-Allied Movement Conference Centre at the heart of *Osmany Uddyan*, the only garden left in the capital city of Dhaka.

PUTTING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE ON THE MEDIA’S AGENDA

Inherent problems with the media’s psyche has prevented the governance debate from gaining central media attention. Environmental governance, like any other kind of governance, has to contend with special interests and the status quo. The fact that we are talking about governance on a global scale makes the issue more complicated. The desire of states to safeguard their national interest is often an obstacle to compliance with the hundreds of international environmental conventions (which are, ironically, designed to protect the long-term interests of all nations).

During the 11th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), a side event was held to which several energy and environment ministers discussed the future of Renewable Energy. Many of the ministers spoke about “renewables” as the future for the world’s energy. Immediately after the meeting, however, two ministers from an African country, were talking in the UN corridors about their belief that nuclear power was the only answer to the massive energy demand in their country. They had not dared voice such view during the forum.

The global environmental regime, as it is currently constituted, is riddled with that kind of doublespeak. For the media to be effective in making governments accountable, several things need to happen. The following four criteria are established to assist media in its effectiveness: capacity building, deliberate media strategy, media self-examination, and redesigning the governance architecture.

Capacity building

As alluded to earlier, many journalists who report on environmental issues have little appreciation of the global concerns that inform the environmental governance debate. Ongoing efforts to train environmental journalists must continue, if only for the reason that the 21st century will be more preoccupied with the environment than any era in world history. Continued problems of poverty and population growth in less developed countries will increasingly strain natural resources, both locally and internationally. Unsustainable consumption patterns in developed economies also threaten to exert increased pressure on globally shared resources.

Only when journalists come to fully appreciate the global nature of the environmental crisis will they endeavor to highlight the efforts required to reverse the trend. Furthermore, empowered journalists will be better able to read beyond sectarian interests to focus on the bigger picture.

Deliberate Media Strategy

In preparation for the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto, the World Bank organized a series of competitions for journalists on water issues. The winners were then sponsored to attend the WSSD and the “Waterdome” in particular, and were eventually sent to the Water Forum in Japan. They are now part of what is called the Water Media Network.

Although the journalists that participated in the competition and subsequent talks did not necessarily agree with the World Bank’s vision for global water management, their inclusion in the debates and interaction with a spectrum of experts served to enhance the quality and increase the number of stories on water issues. Some of the stories were critical of the World Bank for its perceived emphasis on privatization. However, through its efforts the Bank achieved a heightened global awareness concerning the importance of water resources and the problems

attendant in its management. Many countries in Africa, for example, are now having more informed debates about the future of their water, owing in part to the inclusion of the media in these debates. This is but one of many reasons for actors involved in the global environmental governance debate should actively recruit the participation of journalists.

Media Self-Examination

The profession of journalism, like any other in these fast-changing times, is at a crossroads. There is a new school of thought that emphasizes interpretative journalism as a departure from traditional “conveyor belt” reporting. “Conveyor belt” reporting recognizes that journalists can interpret scientific facts and their implications. In support of this, Quamrul Islam Chowdhury of the Asia Pacific Forum for Environmental Journalists insists that the modern journalist must have the ability not only to obtain facts, but also to interpret them, especially if they are of a complex scientific nature.

“The new generation of journalists must have a sound scientific background and consummate media skill...the journalist not only has to understand the science of global warming or the theory of demographic transition, but must also be able to de-jargonize the subject and explain the story in reader-friendly fashion with good reporting at the grass roots to back up his conclusions.”

This calls for a rethinking of the traditional concept of news in order to deal with the modern complexities that issues such as the environment pose. It also calls for a deliberate effort in media houses to increasingly develop the capacity of their employees to deal with contemporary questions, which they will sooner or later have to confront anyway, whether they are prepared for them or not.

REDESIGNING THE GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE

The current global environmental regime is under the auspices of the UN Environment Programme, which many have argued does not have enough teeth to bite into such an overwhelming problem. If UNEP had more extensive arsenal of enforcement power to compel compliance with environmental conventions, perhaps it would catapult environmental governance to a level that would attract greater media and public interest. That is to say that if UNEP had more clout, environmental journalists (and the public) would likely listen more intently when UNEP speaks.

Going back to the Nairobi example of Karura forest, it is perhaps worth noting that UNEP headquarters is physically surrounded by that same forest, and during the standoff of the 1990's, the UN body did not once censure the government for attempting to sell off parts of the forest. In fact, the gate that was erected by the private “developers,” and which was also the site of police

assaults on several environmental activists, is literally a stone's throw away from UNEP offices. That is probably one of the most graphic illustrations of how thoroughly ineffective the current global environmental governance structure is. If UNEP would not reprimand a small developing country such as Kenya on the fundamental issue of deforestation, it is improbable that it would have the muscle to handle larger and more influential economies, which have more control over its funding and general operations.

It is likely that a more vibrant global environmental organization would provide a new environmental focal point that even the media would find hard to resist. No organization placed in charge of such a globally straddling and multi-faceted phenomenon such as the environment can afford the luxury of being lackluster. It must have teeth, and it must bite hard.

CONCLUSION

This presentation does not purport to have unveiled the ultimate solution to the communication conundrum of enforcing global environmental compliance, but I hope that it opens a frontier that has gone largely unexplored. Throughout the world a new breed of environmentally conscious journalists is emerging, and Environmental Journalism Associations are coming up and getting stronger. Many schools of journalism are now offering specialized programs in environmental journalism, and Information Technology is presenting unprecedented opportunities for global journalism. These new trends provide hope for accelerating the Global Environmental Governance agenda through advances in journalistic contributions to the debate. The media has the opportunity to make a tremendous impact by calling attention to the local implications of global environmental actions. .

Only when the populations of villages and hamlets appreciate the seriousness of environmental concerns will they allocate to their governments and political leaders both accountability and the authority to take swift action. A deliberate effort to reach out to the various environmental journalism associations would provide a new platform from which the Global Environmental Governance campaign could be launched. The emerging environmental consciousness of the media should be supported and nurtured in order to develop a critical mass within the industry. For now, however, the media remains a sleeping giant in the fight to put environment on the same level as the other "pillars of sustainable development."