



Woodrow Wilson  
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*Environmental Change and Security Program*

## The Future of Science and Environmental Journalism

Thursday, February 12, 2009

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*Edited Transcript—Seth Borenstein*

Thank you, Geoff, and thank you, Peter, for inviting me. For those of us who cover the environment, you see symptoms of certain things: change forcing localized extinction; habitats are changing rapidly, it's anthropogenic. Evolutionary changes are being forced more rapidly, changes in natural timing, and it's an issue that the public doesn't really notice. But it's not climate change, it's what's happened to those of us who are covering it and other science issues.

There are, as Geoff alluded to, dramatic changes. If you think about what's happening to the economy in general, the journalism business is like Detroit. We're getting it worse, and we're getting it faster, and it's truly depressing, and so reporters, editors, and management flunkies like Peter, who covered climate change and science and environment, are being laid off. And this really does matter because there -- if there are fewer voices, there are fewer people telling you what's going on, you're not going to get the news or as good a version of the news.

But it's not just the national people like Peter. In one week, three friends who covered the science environment beat were laid off. Here, from a Society of Environmental Journalists convention, is a picture of Bruce Ritchie, formerly of the Tallahassee Democrats, and I guess it's my turn to make a pitch for SEJ. If you're very interested, the past president, Tim Wheeler, is right there in the third row. Bruce covered the environment for a long period of time, then they consolidated the beat, so he's supposed to cover the environment and local government, and then they decided they didn't really need either of those and he was laid off.

It's not really just the environment. This is Craig Covault who doesn't cover the environment, he covers space. He was the dean of space reporters. I had a couple of years where I was covering nothing but the space program for *The Orlando Sentinel*, and Craig was the reporter for *Aviation Week* and *Space Technology*. Thirty-seven years he covered the space beat, mostly for *Av Week*. The man covered Apollo. Some of the people who were covering the space program when I was there weren't even born when he started, and he's always probably



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the smartest and one of the most plugged-in people. He was laid off last December from *Av Week*, which decided *Aviation Week & Space Technology* didn't really need a space reporter, at least not one based in Cape Canaveral.

Luckily, Craig has now joined on to *Spaceflight Now* so if you're looking, he's got good stories there.

Next to go, this is *The Seattle-Post Intelligencer*. There's a joint operating agreement between the *PI* and *The Seattle Times*. It's sort of a game of chicken on which one will die. Maybe both, but I tend to doubt that. The interesting things about Seattle and environment and science coverage, is in most major cities you're lucky if you have one reporter covering environment. *Seattle-Post Intelligencer* you have a team of two very able environment reporters, and at *The Seattle Times*, you have a whole team. Both papers also have science reporters, which is unusual these days. Some of them will not be there.

So what happens when you lose people like Peter Dykstra or Bruce Ritchie? This is from "The Observatory" at *Columbia Journalism Review*, which is one of a couple places that does a good job tracking (along with Knight Science Journals) science journals. December 15th from Paul Raeburn, who is a former AP:

I switched to CNN, and found this about this new source of power made from water, a form of salt and other common materials. Poppy Harlow --

-- you've got to love that name --

-- a business correspondent for CNN cheerily recounted the good news. She quoted the inventor saying "the mixture produces a chemical reaction 200 times more powerful than gasoline," and that the discovery is "on the scale of fire."

The caveat? "Many scientists say the technology violates the basic laws of quantum physics." Harlow said these words but they didn't seem to register with her. She might as well have said the only problem, it leaves a little lint in your pockets.

Surely the timing of the story had nothing to do with CNN's recent announcement that it is eliminating its entire science and technology unit and laying off, among others, science correspondent Miles O'Brien. A Google search would have shown





Harlow that the technology in question produced by BlackLight Power of Cranbury, New Jersey, has been strenuously debunked by, among others, Robert Park of the University of Maryland.

If you ever want to check the physics of something, Robert Park is a professional debunker, and according to Park, BlackLight was unable to get a U.S. patent for its research, and earlier this year was denied four patents in the United Kingdom. Lacking patents and independent confirmation of its finding, the company "is therefore dependent on investors with deep pockets and shallow brains."

But if you don't know science, you don't know who to turn to. So there really is a big difference in what's happened in the past year. Curtis Brainard of the Columbia Journalism Review was working on a cover story for the actual magazine, not even the Web site, on what's happening with science journalism, and there was a Harvard study saying it's going down. And when he talked to me, I guess it was the summer of last year, I was going, "No, you know, science journalism is doing probably better than many others in journalism." I pointed to John Noble Wilford and Larry Altman at *The Times* and Warren Leary at *The Times*, and Robert Boyd at *McClatchy*, David Perlman of *the San Francisco Chronicle*. What you'll find with all these gentlemen, I think they're all (well, not Warren) in their 70s or above. They showed the newspapers recognized that smart, intelligent, experienced science, medical writers were worthwhile, and they only get better.

Now, actually Curtis didn't finish that story, thank God. I called him up last December saying, "Please, if you're going to write it, I have changed everything, please let me tell you what I think now." I don't believe any of that anymore. I think we're in as deep if not more trouble. John Noble Wilford, I believe, took the buyout, [and] is doing part-time stuff there. Larry Altman left. Warren Leary left. You know, right there, in just those three at *The Times*, you lose an incredible amount of knowledge.

There are hot spots for new niche reporting. E&E Publications are expanding where the rest of us are shrinking, opening up bureaus. And *ClimateWire*, I highly recommend; John Fialka, the editor of *ClimateWire*, is right there. That's showing that niche publications -- and on the Web, Mother Nature Network, where Peter is -- are growing. The trouble is when you're looking at niches, you're not getting the broad picture you get from a John Noble Wilford or a Warren Leary.





So to stop gazing at our own navels, let's talk about the coverage now that Washington has changed. So let's look at EPA. Coverage of EPA will change, because it's always dictated by who you cover. In some ways it's going to be easier and tougher. During the Bush Administration, when they are changing or what many would consider rolling back environmental rules, reducing enforcement, those were good enterprise stories ripe for the picking, sort of low-lying hanging fruit. When an administration is producing a lot of different initiatives, rolling out this and some new program after another every week, that kind of reduces the time to do stories like that. So if the Obama Administration does that, sort of like the last few years of the Clinton Administration, when they were trying to pull things together at the last minute, you don't have as much time to do some of that enterprise stories. So it's easier because you're just writing like that, but you don't get to do the fun enterprise stories, and that's the tougher part.

Also, you've got shrinking staff, there are fewer of you, you've got to do more work, so you're not going to get as much time to write about things. You know, some of the things I got to do in the past, I got to do stories about reduced environmental enforcement, reduced superfund work, and the changing value of human life that the EPA had. Those are things you can do when you have a little more time, when an EPA is a little more quiet. Some would call it something else.

But there's going to be good stories, because your coverage changes with Washington. The big thing to look at, and especially given the stimulus bill, is pork waste and stupid spending. It's going to be there. It's the nature of government. It's the nature of everything. All it is, is to find it, and have fun looking for it and finding it.

Also, almost every administration leaves land mines for their successor. I was covering the end of the Clinton Administration, they put in a new arsenic and water rule, pretty much daring the Bush Administration to repeal it, which they did, which turned out to be a major public relations fiasco, and the Clinton people were just laughing quite a bit there.

Turf wars cause inaction; you have Carol Browner, you have Lisa Jackson, you have Steven Chu, and Senator Salazar -- who's in charge? Supposedly, I guess, it's Carol Browner, but then you have John Holdren, who at this very moment is going through confirmation hearings in the Senate. You're going to have these issues of turf war, because these are all strong personalities, and that will be maybe inside the beltway stories, but when it causes inaction, then there will be what? Pork waste and stupid spending; there will be failures





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because there's always failures, no matter who is in charge, and those will be fun to write, and those will be things to watch. And then, of course, you know, there will be waste and stupid spending. My contact information: if you need me I'm at SBorenstein@AP.org.

The photograph: There are perks to being a science writer. This is a private "Vomit Comet," ZERO-G. They were sending teachers up in it to experience zero gravity, 16 parabolas of zero gravity. You go up in a converted commercial jet, straight up, and then straight down. So on the way up you get 3 Gs, and on the way down you get zero. Or sometimes they change the parabola so you get about the lunar gravity. I wanted to experience this correctly. Because this is sort of a commercial thing, they encourage people to use certain medications not to get sick. And NASA's old version used to be called the Vomit Comet, for a very good reason. But if you're going to write about this, you don't want to take medicine that will dull your senses. My photographer, he took medicine. Then around parabola 15, I was starting to really look bad. The people for ZERO-G kept hovering around me, "Are you okay?"

And I said, "No, I can make it, I can make it." I'm just, you know, barely making it. And parabola 16, which was the last scheduled one, I go, "Okay, I survived." And then the pilot comes on and says, "Because you guys are having so much fun, we're going to give you a couple more." There's just nothing you can do. The good thing is I did not lose it. I came very close, but this is some of the fun things you get to do. And hopefully, there will be some people out there left to do this, and I'll be left to do this, and there will be fun things like this.



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