

# A familiar story for science and environment reporters

- Change is forcing localized extinction
- Habitats are changing rapidly
- It's anthropogenic
- It's forcing evolution
- It's changing what had been natural timing (phenology)
- And the public isn't noticing it



# It's not climate change

- It's reporters, editors and management flunkies (right) who cover climate change, science, and environment.
- This hinders nationally what people hear, see and read.



# The effects can be local

- In one week, three science/environment reporters that I know were let go. At right is Bruce Ritchie, formerly of the Tallahassee Democrat. First they changed his beat, minimizing environment. Then they laid him off.



# The effects can even be cosmic



- Craig Covault, formerly of Aviation Week and Space Technology. Craig is the dean of space writers, having covered the space program for 37 years.

# Next to go?

- The two Seattle newspapers have some of the most aggressive and best environment writing in the nation. One is likely to die soon. Each paper has not just an environment reporter, but a team. And a science writer.



— December 15, 2008 05:15 PM; Paul Raeburn

## Weird Science (Reporting)[The Observatory](#)-CJR

...I switched to CNN and learned about a new source of power that is pollution-free and cheaper than fossil fuels. It's made from water, "a form of salt," and "other common materials."

Poppy Harlow, a business correspondent for CNN, [cheerily recounted](#) the good news. She quoted the inventor saying that 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 this story has 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've shown Harlow that the technology in question – produced by [Blacklight Power, Inc.](#) of Cranbury, New Jersey – has been strenuously debunked by, among others, [Dr. Robert L. Park](#) of the University of Maryland, whose weekly e-mail column, ["What's New?"](#), keeps a watchful eye on unfounded scientific claims. 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 findings, the company "is therefore dependent on investors with deep pockets and shallow brains," Park wrote.

# What a difference a year makes

- A year ago, I told Columbia Journalism Review that I didn't think science writing was in trouble despite a Harvard report. I pointed to John Noble Wilford, Larry Altman, Robert Boyd, Warren Leary and David Perlman as examples of how science writing was a place where you get better as you age and papers understand that.

## Now

Thank God the reporter didn't get around to writing the story. I called him back three months ago and said I was wrong. I don't believe that anymore. And Wilford, Altman and Leary aren't fulltime at the Times anymore.



# But there are new and niche hotspots for this reporting



- E & E Publishing has been opening up bureaus in many places, has a new climate publication.
- Blogs, blogs, blogs and blogs.

# What's left for those left around

- Coverage of EPA will change. In some ways it will be tougher and easier for reporters. Easier because there will likely be a lot of initiatives and those are easy quick stories. Tougher, because some of the best enterprise stories may not get done for various reason: shrinking reporting staffs, time spent covering breaking news, and some of the stuff to write about (enforcement drop-offs, lack of work on superfund, changing value of human life) may change.

# But there will be good stories

- Pork, waste and stupid spending. It'll be there. We just have to find it.
- Landmines left by previous administration (just like Clinton left the arsenic landmine for the Bush administration).
- Turf wars that cause inaction.
- Did I mention pork, waste and stupid spending?
- Failures.
- Pork, waste and stupid spending.

# Contact info: If I'm still around in a year



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