

# Reporting and Bias

*A journalist's personal attitudes  
should never distort coverage, but neither should  
readers mistake a reporter's honest, independent judgment for bias.*

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**A**t one time or another, most environment reporters have been suspected or accused of bias. The attacks have come not only from a polluting industry or a conservative watchdog group, but sometimes from miffed environmentalists, disappointed neighborhood activists, suspicious readers or even their own editors and publishers.

Why is this? Education and health reporters don't have to defend their blatant prejudice in favor of good education or good health.

"I've been struggling with the question of bias," says Ken Weiss, now a coastal-issues reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*.

He says he spent four years covering higher education, including such issues as "who gets into schools, racial equality, how you make schools better." On that beat, he doesn't remember having had his motivations questioned. "I pride myself on being impeccably fair," Mr. Weiss says. But now that he covers environment issues, he adds, "I'm challenged at every turn by crazed homeowners,

recreational fishermen, whatever.... They get angry at the messenger."

Like Mr. Weiss, many other Western reporters who cover issues of growth, development and the environment are wary and vigilant about that question of bias.

In the region as a whole, the evidence suggests that most environment reporters don't share the view that they and their peers have a "green" or pro-environment bias.

For example, researchers at Brigham Young University surveyed environment reporters at 108 daily newspapers and 87 television stations in eight Western states in 2001.

Among the respondents, only 28% said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they and their peers were "too green" in orientation. The same minority proportion agreed or strongly agreed that environment-beat reporters should "work with community leaders to solve" environment-related problems. Similarly, only 38% agreed or

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## Environmentalists

are among  
the worst.

They are  
both arrogant  
and naïve.

It's a deadly  
combination.

”

*Solveig Torvik, former  
editorial page editor,  
Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

strongly agreed that environment-beat reporters “sometimes should be advocates for the environment.”

Yet however praiseworthy or prize-winning, any reporting about the environment that examines complex and contentious problems is apt to raise eyebrows, elevate blood pressures or incite complaints. Some of the harshest complaining comes from within the journalism community itself.

“What was once excellent environmental reporting has become, in many instances, environmental advocacy,” charges John Costa, the editor of *The Bulletin* in Bend, Oregon, who has editorialized on various sides of environment issues. “There are extreme environmental organizations that would not be satisfied until all natural-resource industries are shut down. We, as journalists, have to recognize that fact when we are covering them.”

Mr. Costa’s perception is widely shared. Russ Hemphill, city editor of *The Wenatchee World* in central Washington, explains that for readers who live on the eastern side of the Cascades, “when you say environmental reporting, it’s a pejorative. It means reporting with a bias.” Richard Wagoner, city editor at *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, observes that something about the environment makes reporters passionate. As a result, he says, “They start talking like environmentalists.” Jane Amari, publisher and editor of the *Arizona Daily Star* in Tucson, says she has known environment reporters who became so wrapped up in pro-preservation thinking that they lost the ability to remain impartial.

Sometimes environment reporters get accused of being just plain ignorant. “They don’t spend enough time with us to understand what we’re doing,” complains Arthur Brown, chairman and former chief executive of Idaho-based Hecla Mining Company, a producer of silver, gold, lead and zinc that has inherited some large Superfund liabilities.

At other times, environment reporters get accused of imposing personal attitudes or values on their stories. Jeffe Selle, a former reporter who now works for Spokane’s Regional Chamber of Commerce, attended a Poynter Institute seminar in 1999 in Seattle, where he listened to a panel of environment reporters and editors, and came away convinced of their bias. “The Tacoma editor says he belongs to environmental organizations,” Mr. Selle recalls. “I thought, What the hell is this?”

Regardless of the source, substantive complaints about bias in environment coverage deserve serious attention. Even if some or most of the complaints are unfounded, they probably arise because environmental-protection ideas often demand wrenching change and extra costs, especially for business and labor interests.

The challenges that businesses face in achieving environmental goals or satisfying government regulations are too often dismissed or downplayed by reporters.

Modifying irrigation schemes, logging practices, fishing restrictions, suburban land uses and grazing traditions may indeed be possible, but such changes are rarely easy or inexpensive.

Reporters aren’t likely to appreciate these realities unless they spend time with the industries and resource users they purport to cover. As many business reporters could use training in environment and science journalism, so could many environment reporters benefit from training in business and economics—if only to understand better the implications

and consequences of remedies being proposed by environmental activists.

We acknowledge the pervasiveness of the perception that environment reporters bring bias into their work in a way that other reporters don't. This complaint is derived partly from what is at stake on the beat. The concept of "environment" encompasses broad and intellectually exciting terrain. At its best, reporting on this terrain challenges society's most basic beliefs about science, capitalism, politics—and even our own chosen behaviors as human beings. When the reporting is done well, entrenched interests will howl. But the same reaction occurs when the reporting is thin or sloppy.

Reporters can easily become intoxicated by enthusiasm for the natural world. Being in an old growth forest evokes feelings quite different from those that arise while visiting a clear-cut tract. Hiking in a red rock desert is, emotionally, a very different experience from touring a coal mine. However much a reporter might recognize intellectually the importance of wood or coal, or adhere to the principles of impartiality, there's a strong temptation to portray environmental arguments in terms of good and bad, of right and wrong.

### Testing All Sides

All across the West, we encountered reporters who told us that their keen personal interest in the natural world was a major factor that attracted them to the environment beat. But many of these same reporters were quick to add that their deep interest in nature doesn't make them "environmentalists" in the pejorative sense.

The distinction between good journalism and emotional advocacy is important. To avoid bias, a reporter must constantly challenge his own most basic assumptions. The best stories find meanings and draw conclusions from facts. These stories help readers understand what is at stake, but they still allow readers to decide for themselves what could or should be done. This kind of reporting is not the same as bias.

Nor can journalists simply inoculate themselves against all biases, contends Walter Dean, a 30-year news veteran who now works for the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Speaking in Boise in December 2002 during a conference devoted to news coverage of Western issues, Mr. Dean suggested that societies have inherent biases. So do journalists, and that isn't necessarily bad.

For example, Mr. Dean told the conference, peace is generally presumed to be better than war. But as a result, he asked, "should every peace treaty be ratified? Are there no battles worth fighting? Is democracy the best form of government for everyone in all places at all times in history?" Order may be better than chaos, Mr. Dean added. "but at what cost? Wasn't the Boston Tea Party or the American Revolution somewhat chaotic? Is a loud and unruly demonstration less righteous than an orderly one?"

Anything created in journalism will have bias, Mr. Dean told the conference. The responsibility of journalism, he suggested, is to manage bias appropriately. He recommended that journalists adopt a strict discipline of verifying information before putting it into stories. He also urged journalists to disclose how the information was obtained, to identify in each story what is not known and to keep an open mind. "Getting the facts right isn't enough," Mr. Dean argued. "The real

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Our community  
isn't real  
sympathetic  
to tree-huggers.  
We're not going  
to force (ideas)  
down the  
community's  
throat.  
We're not going  
to alienate  
the entire  
community.

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*An editor in the  
Southwest*

challenge is to present the right facts.”

Using this approach, we think journalists shouldn’t be faulted for believing that a clean environment is better than a dirty environment, that beauty in nature should be appreciated or that watersheds deserve protection from abuse. Where people most often differ is in choosing solutions to environment problems, especially in deciding what and how much should be traded or forfeited to achieve widely acceptable solutions. Reason and science may influence such decisions, but the decisions are reached on the basis of values, beliefs and attitudes. And that means they are made in accordance with biases.

Environmental thinking is relatively new in the North American West’s culture. Many of its precepts are only decades old, at most. The field of environmental science is expanding rapidly. Meanwhile, Westerners’ understanding of costs and benefits surrounding environment issues is still in flux, still taking shape, still evolving.

These factors don’t mean that journalists must be paralyzed, fearing to report because today’s apparent solution might not be the best one for all time. Rather, journalists have to put all sides to a continual test of scrutiny and skepticism. They must try to measure promises against actual results. They must stay alert to contradictions, new findings and new approaches.

For example, some elected officials, regulators and think-tank essayists have suggested that the hefty corporate and taxpayer investments required for curbing pollution might be better spent on other environment-related efforts, such as wetland conservation or mass-transit development. In a similar vein, secondary sewage treatment is far more effective than primary treatment in protecting public health. Water purified to parts per billion is safer to drink than water purified only to parts per million. But the issue is seldom that simple. Communities throughout the West are constantly making tradeoffs in deciding how and where to allocate limited resources.

It’s not that industrialists or developers, conservationists or preservationists, resource consumers or property-rights defenders are right or wrong. All such constituencies—and their respective arguments and evidence—should be subjected to careful review and critical thinking. The journalists who do this reviewing and thinking must constantly guard against their personal prejudices.

In 2001, reporter Tom Knudson at *The Sacramento Bee* sparked both praise and complaint with a series of articles about how many mainstream environmental organizations have, in size of budgets and in fundraising tactics, become remarkably like the large institutions they criticize. Those stories had an impact because Mr. Knudson subjected big-league environmentalism to the same scrutiny he had earlier given to big business.

## Independent Judgment

To ensure balance in an environment story, simply quoting the opposing sides isn’t sufficient. That shortcut only deprives readers of a journalist’s considered judgment and of a competent basis for reaching their own conclusions. One reporter in Hawaii told us he quotes “both” sides and assumes that his readers will “believe” whichever speaker comes across as the more intelligent and articulate. In our view, this reporter abdicates his responsibility to find meaning and significance independently and then to share with readers what he has learned. Readers want accuracy and fairness. But they also want clear, independent analysis. And independent analysis is not the equivalent of bias.

A recent example of independent analysis was *The Oregonian’s* 2002 series, “Digging Deeper,” in which the newspaper challenged claims and assumptions made by the Port of Portland and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in their plan to dredge the lower Columbia River. In a critique of “flawed, outdated data,” the

newspaper examined the impact of dredging on fisheries and local economies, while also challenging the veracity of the Port's public-relations campaign.

One Western environment reporter whose career illustrates the complexity of the bias controversy is Rocky Barker.

His legacy at his former newspaper, the *Post Register* in Idaho Falls, is still debated. Former *Post Register* publisher J. Rob Brady praises Mr. Barker's work there as "one of the diadems on our crown." But we also encountered Idaho Falls residents who weren't sorry to see him leave because they found his style too aggressive.

Mr. Barker now works for *The Idaho Statesman*, a Gannett-owned daily in Boise. He is probably the most influential environment journalist in his state. His decision to cover or not to cover an issue often affects political agendas. In a deeply conservative region, his newspaper series about four Snake River dams helped persuade both the *Statesman's* editorial board and many Boise-area readers that it could make more sense—in both economic and environmental terms—to breach the dams and thus help runs of endangered fish to recover.

*The Idaho Statesman's* executive editor, Carolyn Washburn, admits that she had doubts at first about Mr. Barker's impartiality, but now he enjoys unusual independence. His editors even let him contribute to "Writers on the Range," a syndicated opinion column that now appears up to three times a week in more than 70 Western newspapers. (The *Statesman* deliberately refrains from running Mr. Barker's contributions to the syndicate, however, to keep separate his reportorial duty to Boise readers.)

How does Mr. Barker manage to do all of this? And should he be allowed to do it? Mr. Barker is hard-working, knowledgeable and smart. He is also flexible enough to satisfy the tight-writing guidelines of Gannett—and willing to challenge his own beliefs.

"I know I've been wrong before [on policy ideas], totally wrong," he admits. So he writes stories about his own blunders. As a way to fit complex issues into tight formats, he invented a standing sidebar called "The Rocky Box" to run with ongoing disputes. The sidebar summarizes the background, conserving Mr. Barker's time and the paper's space.

Mr. Barker is blunt about his disbelief in the notion that journalism is objective. "I'm in this business to have an impact," he says. "I'm not some scribe sitting on the sidelines." He does not regard passivity as the proper role of a journalist.

To the contrary, he believes those journalists who assume passive roles are disingenuous, deluded or missing the point of the profession. "I think we [journalists at *The Idaho Statesman*] have had a major impact, more so than environmental coverage elsewhere."

Mr. Barker even goes so far as to say that he considers himself to be "a part of the environmental movement." But he quickly qualifies that statement, adding that he doesn't mean he's an environmentalist in the way that a Sierra Club officer is, but rather that he cares about the environment and wants to make a difference. Making such an admission is both honest and obvious, he argues. And by acknowledging the obvious, he believes he creates more trust with readers, not less.

Ms. Washburn was skeptical of Mr. Barker's attitude and approach when she first arrived in Boise, but his reputation in the community swayed her. "Accuracy is more than just getting the names and facts right," she says. "It's about fully reflecting the issue."

Mr. Barker does that. Besides, she adds, Mr. Barker's stories are carefully edited and frequently challenged before they run.

We are not suggesting that Mr. Barker should be a role model for all

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When you  
care about  
education,  
you’re  
not accused  
of being  
pro-education  
or  
pro-children.  
But when  
you care  
about  
the environment,  
you become  
a lightning rod.  
”

*Rocky Barker,  
environment reporter,  
The Idaho Statesman*

environment reporters. Nor are we citing him as an example of a biased reporter. Rather, we conclude that the candor with which he and his editors talk about the beat and its pitfalls is constructive and healthy.

As we reflect on the hundreds of interviews we conducted throughout the West, we realize that one of the most disturbing findings was the poor level of communication inside many newsrooms about the ethical, factual and bias-based issues of environment coverage. We found that some editors suspect their staffers of being naïve and prejudiced, while some reporters detect condescension from their immediate supervisors and even from higher-ranking managers who may possess strong beliefs without much real knowledge.

Many Western reporters express frustration that they are surprised frequently by a story’s poor placement or delay—and seldom given a reason for what happened. We conclude that having more regular and more candid discussions between reporters and editors would be helpful. In general, the editors (who have higher rank in these organizations than the reporters) should be the people who initiate and encourage this practice.

Such approaches have been shown to work at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, where Alex Barnum, the paper’s science and environment editor, makes a point of talking often with his reporters, especially at the conceptual stages of a story’s development. Assignment editors apply similar techniques at *The Press-Enterprise* in Riverside, *The Oregonian* in Portland, *The Register-Guard* in Eugene, the *Tri-City Herald* in Kennewick and the *Casper Star-Tribune*.

Healthier professional relationships between environment reporters and their editors can make huge differences in both news-coverage productivity and job satisfaction. But in the degree of this success in sustaining such relationships, Idaho’s Mr. Barker is an exception. Other Western reporters have paid a steep price for their passion. Rather than a proven path to career advancement, the contentious environment beat is often risky. Instead of being congratulated for hard-hitting journalism, the most aggressive environment reporters have sometimes found themselves pushed out of their jobs.

About a decade ago, Richard Manning left his reporting job at Montana’s *Missoulian* during the peak of the timber wars. He cites several important factors, including clashes with his editors, his own restlessness, timber-industry complaints about his fairness and the newspaper’s concern that he’d turned his indignation about environmental damage into advocacy. (Mr. Manning has since become the author of several books on important environment topics.)

In the same era, *The Vancouver Sun*’s Mark Hume was summoned to his executive editor’s office to be grilled by a timber-company executive. Mr. Hume quit a few years later. Other reporters at the *Sun* also experienced a similar lack of support from senior editors. Such experiences, combined with cutbacks to environment coverage, led to the departure of two more environment reporters from the paper.

The people involved in these incidents disagree, in retrospect, on whether the reporting was wrong, on whether news managers caved into industry pressure, and even on whether the disputes themselves may have had more to do with individual personalities than with journalism issues.

Nevertheless, these kinds of cases may indicate a need for clearer thinking, clearer reporting guidelines and earlier communication within some newsrooms about how certain environment and natural-resource stories should be covered.