NEWS MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND OIL SPILL COVERAGE

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ABSTRACT: *The news media play a key role in framing the media coverage of oil spills. It is imperative that scientists, industry and policymakers are fully tuned into the ways in which current news organisations operate. Over recent years, a growing environmental promotion industry has emerged, alongside an increasing emphasis on environmental advocacy within the commercial sector. A number of information crises (notably, the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989) have forced sections of industry to take a more proactive approach to environmental communications as potent media imagery has directly contradicted assurances that environmental protection is not compromised by their activities. Particular issues or events that capture attention tend to be highly visually appealing and resonate with deeply held beliefs and values that operate at a symbolic level.*

This paper examines the preliminary findings of an international online survey of environmental reporting distributed to key environmental journalist news groups and generalist journalist news groups during June and July 2002. In particular, it focuses upon the following: journalists' views about what makes a newsworthy story; their degree of scientific training; the constraints under which they work; their main sources of information; their relationships with news sources; and the impact of editorial policy. Interviews with environment correspondents reveal that relatively few possess scientific training and they tend to rely heavily upon official sources of information. The news agendas of broadcasters closely mirror that of print journalists and there is remarkable consensus concerning 'news values' – the taken for granted notions about what constitutes a 'good' news story. Having presented the main findings of the survey, the paper concludes by arguing that what is needed is greater communication between scientists, industry and journalists leading to an increased mutual recognition of the specific constraints under which they operate.

Introduction

The news media play a central role in determining how public problems are defined. It is here that the struggle is staged between social actors competing with one another to influence the symbolic representation of social issues (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Wolfsfeld, 1997). This paper presents some preliminary findings from an online survey distributed to journalist Internet news groups around the globe during July 2002. The purpose of the research was to investigate journalistic practices in relation to the coverage of environmental issues. The survey included specific questions on the reporting of oil spills. This piece of research is methodologically innovative, being one of the first online surveys of its kind to investigate journalistic practices in relation to environmental reporting. A clear advantage of using such a method is that one can access target groups across the globe relatively easily with minimum financial cost. Both specialist and generalist news groups were included in the survey since environmental issues are often covered by general news reporters, rather than environmental, science or consumer affairs correspondents. Respondents were assured complete anonymity, if they so wished. This gave them the freedom to openly express their views on issues such as editorial interference.

Surveys can provide a useful guide concerning journalistic practices in relation to the reporting of environmental issues. However, one of the drawbacks with this method is that most questions are closed and there is little opportunity to delve into the complexities of the issues. Accordingly, the second stage of the project will be to conduct in-depth interviews with individuals who have stated that they would be prepared to take part in further research. The present paper sketches initial findings from the first phase of the research and therefore the results must be viewed as tentative.

News values. Far from simply randomly responding to issues and events the news media are structured by a range of organisational practices and constraints. Like any other area of news reporting, the coverage of oil spills is affected by the routines, structures and professional ideologies that are ingrained within journalism. Journalists operate with a collection of underlying ideas about what constitutes a 'good' news story. As I have argued elsewhere:

> "These unquestioned news values hold a profound influence upon a whole host of daily decisions concerning the selection, framing and ordering of potential news stories. These judgements reveal assumptions concerning the editorial identity of the media outlet and the target audience, as well as conventional story-telling mechanisms." (Anderson, in press 2002)

There is a tendency for much environmental coverage to be event rather than issue centred. News coverage is a 24-hour daily

operation and television news is particularly affected by time constraints. A number of studies have found that it tends to be dramatic events, such as major oil spills, that capture media attention rather than routine events or stories about gradually developing environmental problems (Molotch and Lester, 1975; Hansen, 1993). The ease with which one can visually communicate the destruction brought about by oil spills is another important factor. The visual qualities of a potential item are especially important for television news. When asked to comment in the survey on how judgements are made in the selection of news stories, one broadcaster responded: "Does it have visuals that go with the television story? How many people does it affect? Kids, animals and fire are 'sexy' for television. Viewers like seeing them".

Much disaster reporting follows a standard script beginning with the disruption of normalcy, investigation of mystery, and finally the restoration of normalcy (Browning and Shetler, 1992; Wilkinson, 1999). Coverage of oil spills tends to centre on images of wildlife enmeshed in oil. Visually appealing wildlife such as seals and otters often become symbols for an environment in crisis (see Anderson, 1991 & 1997). One of the reasons why the Exxon Valdez disaster led to so much intense media interest was that it occurred in the setting of Prince William Sound; a setting that symbolises much that Alaskans treasure about their 'unspoiled' natural heritage (Birkland, 1997; Davidson, 1990; Smith, 1992; Wheelwright, 1994; Wilson, 1992). The effects of the oil spill on the area's wildlife received sustained prominence in the US news media, particularly in weekly news magazines and television news (see Dyer et al. 1991; Birkland, 1997). As Smith (1992) observes, sea otters became the focus of attention in news reporting because of their anthropomorphic appeal and because, compared to birds, they were much more likely to be found in the Valdez wildlife rescue centre. The picture of a sea otter drenched in oil appearing in Time magazine (10th April, 1989) typifies the way in which otters were used to enhance the story appeal for the audience (Church, 1989). In fact the official count of dead birds was hugely higher than that for dead otters yet they received only marginally more coverage (see Smith, 1992).

Some major oil spills generate relatively little publicity and there is no simple correspondence between the scale of the disaster and the number of column inches or air time devoted to a story. The degree to which an oil spill receives prominence within the news media is related to its ability to resonate with deeply held beliefs and values at a symbolic level. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) suggest, some symbols have greater potency than others. This depends on how far they connect with widely held values and cultural themes. In this way accidental news can often act as a news icon, in that it serves to set the public definition of issues and becomes prominent on public policy agendas (Anderson, 1997; Birkland, 1997; Molotch and Lester, 1974). The respondents in the online survey were asked to briefly state which factors exert the most influence on them in deciding whether to cover an environmental story. The most frequently cited factors were novelty, drama, the agenda of government officials and the impact on the economy. When questioned specifically about oil spills the majority of the respondents in the online survey stated that they rarely or never reported oil spills. Out of a total of 56 respondents, 22 stated that they rarely covered oil spills and 18 stated that they never covered oil spills. A relatively small number (5) replied that they sometimes cover oil spills. Only 1 respondent claimed that they frequently reported oil spills. When asked to consider how often oil spill coverage goes beyond the 'facts' to consider the institutional and regulatory context (for example, maritime policy, safety standards), the majority of respondents (24) thought that reports sometimes achieve this. A total of 12 respondents thought that such reports rarely go beyond the 'facts', whilst 7 respondents claimed that this was never the case.

One of the problems with event-centred coverage is that there is a tendency to downplay structural or institutional causes. In the case of the Exxon Valdez disaster, coverage tended to be framed around the allegation that it was caused by the drunken state of Captain Joseph Hazelwood. This marginalised other possible explanations involving cutbacks in maritime safety standards, or the poor capacity of the oil industry to clean up large oil spills in areas such as Prince William Sound (Hannigan, 1995). In a study of reporters involved in covering the Exxon Valdez oil spill Conrad Smith found that there was only slight agreement with the statement that stories about the spill generally went beyond the facts to consider broader issues (see Smith, 1992). Much of the television news coverage of the oil spill concentrated on the story of the drunken sea captain. Indeed, Smith (1992) found that none of the 179 network stories examined in the study closely focused on any of the institutions that held responsibility for maintaining tanker safety standards and developing contingency plans.

Constraints affecting environmental reporting. Print journalists and broadcasters face a number of constraints that impact upon the coverage of environmental issues. The news media are complexly differentiated and, to varying degrees, they are influenced by a range of constraints including editorial policy and ownership, advertising pressure, news cultures, lack of space, the perception that the audience are disinterested, deadline pressures, the complexity of the issues, lack of specialist training and legal issues (see Anderson, 1997). The online survey asked media practitioners to rank each of these constraints on a scale of one to five, where five is "very important" and one is "completely unimportant". The findings suggest that the constraints that were regarded as the least significant were legal issues and the perception that the public are not interested in the issues. The most important constraints appeared to be the complexity of the issues, lack of interest from Editors and lack of space. Other factors that were seen to play a role were access to experts, lack of information sources, relevance to the economy, lack of pictures to illustrate the story, ideological bias and unglamorous subject matter.

When asked whether they had ever been the subject of any form of pressure in relation to their reporting of environmental issues, a number of respondents provided instances where they had experienced some form of editorial interference. For example, one reporter was told to "tone down doom and gloom"; another experienced pressure to "ensure I was scrupulously fair to industry and critics." Another respondent commented: "Every major environmental issue I have ever reported has drawn pressure from industry and politicians."

News sources and scientific training. A number of studies suggest that relatively few journalists that report on environmental issues possess a scientific background (Dunwoody and Peters, 1992; Peters, 1995). Only 6% of the respondents in the online survey had advanced level scientific training. In an earlier study that was based upon interviews with print and broadcast environment correspondents in the UK, it was found that they were divided as to whether they thought a lack of scientific training was an advantage or disadvantage (see Anderson, 1997). Since oil spill disasters happen relatively infrequently often the assigned reporters are inexperienced and may have difficulty in tracking down the appropriate sources. At the same time the news sources may have limited experience in

dealing with the media on a routine basis (Smith, 1992).Coupled with this is the problem many journalists face of being unfamiliar with the area where the disaster has occurred as well as facing considerable deadline pressure. Smith observes that, in the case of the Exxon Valdez disaster:

> "Many of the journalists from outside Alaska were general assignment reporters who had no special knowledge of Alaska, the history of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, marine safety, aquatic ecology, or any of the other issues that would have provided a context in which to interpret the spill as an economic, political, or environmental event." (1992: 86)

A large body of literature suggests there tends to be a heavy reliance upon official sources of information within news reporting (see Ericson et al. 1989; Gandy, 1982; Gans, 1980; Hall et al. 1978; Hansen, 1999). Government officials, in particular, have been found to enjoy advantaged access to the news media (Gandy, 1982; Schlesinger, 1990). Smith (1992) found that public officials were four times as likely to appear as sources in network US television stories about Exxon Valdez compared with scientists and oil experts. Official sources were also found to be over-represented in Smith's sample of US national newspaper coverage of the oil spill. The representatives of established environmental groups were used significantly less frequently and appeared to simply perform the function of 'balancing' the story. However, a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the coverage reveals that the views of environmentalists received considerable prominence in the initial framing of the story, particularly on television news and in weekly news magazines (Lawrence and Birkland, 1999). Indeed, they received far more coverage in television and news magazines than the views of the oil industry.

Where scientists appear as sources they are far more likely to have institutional backing than to have independent status (Dunwoody, 1986). Moreover, media practitioners tend to view scientists who have already been used as sources by the media as possessing greater credibility. Many news media formats favour a confrontational dialogue between experts, and journalists are presented with great difficulties in interpreting these competing claims. The sheer complexity of many environmental issues represents a major constraint. Also, legal restrictions can sometimes hamper considered debate. In the case of the Exxon Valdez legal restrictions prevented scientists examining the spill to reveal their findings until the lawsuits were resolved (Smith, 1992).

The respondents in the online survey were asked to rank news sources in terms of their importance as providers of information. The findings suggest that universities and independent research establishments, grassroots environmental networks, scientists and local/national government authorities and laboratories are regarded as the most important sources of information. Interestingly, the results suggest that politicians are not regarded as a very important news source. However, as stated earlier, a number of studies suggest that government sources often enjoy privileged access in the reporting of environmental issues (for example, see Cottle 1999; Hansen, 1993 & 1999). The respondents were also asked to rank news sources on a scale of 1 (untrustworthy) to 5 (highly trusted). Politicians were clearly seen to be the least trustworthy sources, followed by environmental pressure groups and grassroots environmental networks. The sources regarded as the most trustworthy were found to be university/independent research establishments, and then scientists. In an earlier interview-based study UK print journalists were found to display considerable distrust of Greenpeace (see Anderson, 1997).

Conclusions

This paper has argued that there is a need for greater understanding of the ways in which news media organisations operate. Particular issues or events that capture attention tend to be highly visually appealing and resonate with deeply held beliefs and values that operate at a symbolic level. Much environmental coverage is event-centred and powerful visual images that accompany unexpected dramatic incidents have the potential to operate as news icons. Oil spill reporting tends to focus upon the anthropomorphic appeal of images of oil soaked wildlife such as sea otters. This can play an important role in the definition of public problems and environmentalists have become increasingly adept in using these images to get their message across.

The paper has also suggested that journalists are often poorly equipped to report on scientific issues. Few journalists covering environmental issues possess scientific training. There is a major conflict between the tendencies for scientists to qualifty everything and the news media's preference for clear, unqualified statements. While scientists are concerned with the long-term impact of oil spills, journalists tend to be more interested in short-term, immediate effects. Scientists themselves often tend to display a suspicious attitude towards the news media and many have difficulty in accessibly communicating their work in a form that will appeal to news values. The research process is relatively lengthy and their work is subject to lengthy peer review before it is published. By contrast, journalists working to tight deadlines have little opportunity to check facts or consider their wider significance. Their stories are usually circulated very quickly after they have been briefly glanced over by news editors, who often possess little knowledge of the issues (Smith, 1992). Also, journalistic traditions of 'impartiality' and 'balance' tend to favour a formula of presenting two opposing viewponts which overlooks the subtle complexities of an issue.

There is an urgent need for greater communication between scientists, industry and journalists leading to an increased mutual recognition of the specific constraints under which they operate. This presents major challenges for all those involved in defining the issues. Simply blaming the media shows a lack of understanding of the news production process and the practical constraints within which journalists operate. In the wake of the furore over the sinking of the Brent Spar North Sea oil installation Shell was forced to re-evaluate its public relations approach. Big business can no longer afford to take a reactive approach. The news media face a difficult job in covering the complex relationship between science, policy and values; nevertheless, there is scope for greater critical reflection on how the issues are communicated. At the same time industry, policymakers and scientists need to adapt their communications strategies and develop greater familiarity with the ways in which the news media work.

Biography

Dr Alison Anderson is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Plymouth, UK. She is author of 'Media, Culture and the Environment' and has written widely on the media representation of environmental issues. She has recently

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