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The Greening Of The Media

By

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The Greening of the Media

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Whatever else you may say about satellite television, it has done one thing: showed us how absurd national borders are. One of my best programmes on cable is the weather forecast. Recently, they have started doing some clever animation at the studio with satellite weather pictures and bring you a moving picture of white clouds swirling across brown continents.

I don't listen to that breezy narration about 'a bit of unsettled weather over Eastern Australia over the weekend', but watch transfixed at a planet without borders, no dotted lines on the map. Just the land, the oceans and the wind moving the clouds about.

But these images are fleeting, and once more the screen flips back to the News of the Day: Rwandan refugees fleeing across borders, or renewed fighting across lines on the Balkan map.

Today, the environmental threats to the planet's viability are global. They are induced by the success and spread of the human species, but like weather patterns environmental problems make a mockery of national boundaries.

Sea-level rise caused by global warming will one day wipe the Maldives off the map, in the Chilean city of Punta Arenas which is the largest city under the ozone hole children already wear dark-glasses, caps and cover their arms to protect themselves from harmful ultra-violet radiation.

Poverty, population growth, global warming or ozone depletion are such serious challenges to future life on Earth that reporting them calls for a new breed of journalists that has the energy and vision to move beyond the traditional concepts of reporting and writing.

My journalism guru, Tarzie Vittachi, who passed away last year, liked to say that there are three environments: two outer and one inner. The two outer environments are the natural environment (trees, water, air, soil) and the human environment of poverty in which more than half the human race lives. These two are the two sides of the same coin.

The third dimension is the inner environment: the values that determine our own conduct, our relationship with the community, our natural environment and the cosmos. Tarzie called this the "in-environment".

Transformation of news coverage of the environment must begin with the transformation of the reporter's inner being. The journalists' value system, character and integrity must reflect the passion and curiosity needed to cover the global challenge. To change the world, the journalist must first change herself or himself.

The scope and complexity of the global environmental crisis demands a new consciousness, reporters with broader mental horizons. We need Journalists Without Borders.

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But even as the world becomes more politically, culturally and environmentally interdependent, we see media reluctant to change. It still reduces migration, racism, the population explosion, famine and wars to discrete isolated factoids not linked to larger global processes.

Journalists are expected to aspire for sterile objectivity. They are told to report and not explain. Professional ethics require them to show super-human aloofness and not be moved by injustice and greed. Thus, "objective" status-quo journalism is biased by because it is blind to wrongs. This kind of reporting is scrupulously accurate on facts but misses the nuances of the larger truth.

The New Journalist needs to look at the connections, the development-environment trade-off, and do it with sensibility and skill that will reflect the writer's passion for the story. The New Journalist not only needs to get the facts right, but also let the feelings show.

In the Asia-Pacific, environmental threats stem from both poverty and prosperity. More than half the world's population lives here, and most of them are forced to burn forests or blast corals to just survive from day to day. They have been given no alternatives.

And in the other dynamic Asia of the newly-industrialising economies, per capita incomes are soaring. But this affluence has often been attained at high environmental cost. The pollute-now-pay-later economic growth model of the fast-track NICs are being replicated in the region's emerging economies. What are the implications for the global environment of a ten-fold increase in the purchasing power of 1.5 billion Asians in the next 20 years? Very few in the region's media are asking these questions.

Coverage of environmental issues are governed by prevailing laws, and in some countries governments consider it subversive for the media to discuss issues like rainforest loss, bio-diversity or dam projects. Ironically, the economically advanced Asian countries in general have the most restrictive media while the poorer ones have a noisy and rambunctious free press.

Some Asian governments that argue vociferously on behalf of the South in international environmental meetings unfortunately have domestic policies that ape western economic growth models that they themselves criticise for being wasteful and consumerist. They champion the rights of the world's poor and western greed, but within their borders trample on the rights of minorities, and show scant regard for conserving their natural wealth which is also world's wealth. The 'sovereignty clause' was the most hotly-debated part of the Rio Declaration: where does the planet's survival transcend national interest?

Environmental journalism today must have the ability to look at these linkages, understand global economic inequities but also local mis-governance and avarice that underpin environmental destruction.
This new generation of journalists must have sound scientific background and consummate media skills. It takes a lot of training. The journalist not only has to understand the science of global warming or the theory of demographic transition, but also be able to de-jargonise the subject and explain the story in reader-friendly fashion with good reporting at the grassroots to back up the story's conclusions.

Because many environmental problems are of a long-term nature, are abstract, involve a great deal of scientific uncertainty, involve complex legal issues and involve speculative economics they cannot be done in sound-bites and box-items.

One danger is to cry wolf too often. Western-style journalism is geared to disaster coverage and cannot seem to cover global warming or population without a lead that says: "The End of the World Is Here".

The scare-factor has been overdone and tends to turn people off. But what there is not enough of is a closer look at how environmental degradation has an immediate impact on the most-vulnerable people and how in turn this forces them to destroy more the environment to survive. The challenge for the reporter is to cover this with accuracy and flair so the editor will buy the story.

There is great deal of scientific uncertainty about many environmental threats. Scientists disagree about the timetable of climate change or species extinction, but they do not disagree that things are going very badly wrong. Environmental coverage should not get bogged down on the scientific uncertainty for the sake of highlighting a disagreement in the academic community, but focus on the bottom line and the search for solutions.

Objectivity can be stretched too far. If 90 scientists believe sea levels are going to rise by one metre by the year 2050 and ten scientists believe it is going to rise by only one centimetre, we do not have to give equal coverage to both.

Scientists disagree about whether or not global warming will take place, but they do not disagree that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today is five times higher than before the industrial revolution. So what are governments of industrialised countries which are generating most of it going to do about that?

If the Asian media takes environmental protection seriously, it needs to:

- Train selected specialised reporters thoroughly in not only basic journalism but also the science in a vigorous re-education programme making use of existing institutions and facilities.

- Sensitise key editors and gate-keepers to the importance of environmental coverage so they are more receptive to story ideas and set aside more column inches for good features.
- Get journalists and editors to see the linkages and not take the one-problem-at-a-time approach. Get them to focus less on the specific events and more on the processes behind those events.

- Help improve media access to up-to-date information through cheap and easy electronic databases.

- Get media training institutions to set up a clearing house for information on latest issues and breakthroughs.

END