

By David B. Sachsman

Public Relations Influence on Coverage of Environment in San Francisco Area

More than half of environmental stories were based on press releases, most frequently those of government agencies.

► Throughout most of the 1960s, unless a river was on fire or a major city was in the midst of a week-long smog alert, pollution was commonly accepted by both the press and the public as a fact of life—as part and parcel of industrial society. Corporate public relations promoted this view and skillfully kept the public satisfied. The press rarely heard the bad news of industry pollution but often received good-news releases concerning industry pollution controls and the many benefits offered to the community by local corporations.

Cutlip in 1962 estimated that some 35% of the content of newspapers came from public relations practitioners. He said that more and more the news gathering job was being abandoned to the public relations professional. Cutlip contended that study would show that the new, complex areas of news such as science, health, education and social welfare were being covered in a large degree by the PR practitioner, not the aggressive, investigative reporter.¹

The environment clearly was a new, very complex area of the news, and the rise of environmental awareness in the late 1960s was due, at least partly, to

what Richard W. Darrow, president of the Hill and Knowlton PR firm, called the Great Ecological Communications War—a war between conflicting public relations forces.² The media now were receiving environmental releases not only from industry, but also from government agencies and officials, citizen-action pressure groups, and other institutions such as universities. The environment became a hot news story in 1969. The dramatic Santa Barbara Channel-Union Oil leak and the flood of conflicting environmental releases caused print and broadcast editors to begin taking seriously their own local problems of air and water pollution, overcrowding, and the loss of natural resources. In 1969 the *New York Times* created an environment beat—a practice that would be followed by major newspapers across the nation.³

In the early 1970s, the San Francisco Bay Area was at the forefront of the environmental information explosion. In 1971, the Bay Area contained 28 daily newspapers, six television stations, and eight radio stations with independent news operations. Fifteen of these media employed 16 environmental reporters.⁴ The Bay Area was the perfect place to study news coverage of the environment

¹ Scott M. Cutlip, "Third of Newspapers' Content PR-Inspired," *Editor & Publisher*, May 26, 1962, p. 68.

² Richard W. Darrow, *Communications in an Environmental Age*. Address before the 1971 Economic Council of the Forest Products Industry, Phoenix, Jan. 15, 1971 (New York: Hill and Knowlton, Inc., 1971), p. 11.

³ David Mark Rubin and David Peter Sachs, *Mass Media and the Environment*, Vol. II, Report of project supported by National Science Foundation Grant GZ-1777 (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University, 1971), Chapter Two, p. 1.

⁴ Rae Goodell, "Environment: The Last Fad? The Metaethic of Bay Area Media," unpublished paper, Stanford University, 1971, pp. 6-7, 9-10, 12, 53-8.

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and the influence of public relations on environmental coverage.

This project examined mass media behavior regarding environmental information to determine how the media decide what news to carry about environmental issues. Hypothesizing that the actions of sources of information play a role in determining media behavior, this project examined the nature and influence of news sources on San Francisco Bay Area environmental coverage. In addition to studying the media gatekeeping process regarding environmental press releases, this project examined other "sorting out" and "editing" processes (regarding all environmental news received) to determine the influence of internal factors as well as the influence of news sources on environmental coverage. Hypothesizing that the most important internal factor is the reporter, this project also examined the role of the specialized reporter in Bay Area environmental coverage to find out if specialists are of any significant value in achieving quality and quantity environmental coverage.

Procedure

A purposive sample of 11 Bay Area reporters and editors saved or made a note regarding the environmental press releases and other material they received during May and June, 1971. The sample was drawn by categorizing the 42 daily media by the presence or absence of an environmental reporter, the kind of medium, and the size of circulation, and then asking the reporter or editor in charge of environmental material at media within each of the categories to participate in the study. The journalists used their own definitions of the environment in sorting their mail. They were given boxes containing file folders. A questionnaire was drawn on the face of every file folder. On the folder for each listed week, they noted the sources of the releases they considered environmental, descriptions of these releases, whether the material was discarded, saved (for reference), or used, and comments as to why discarded, why saved,

and how and why used. If the reporter or editor could part with the release, it was placed in the folder.

The second part of this project was a content analysis of the environmental coverage offered by all five Bay Area metropolitan daily newspapers, eight other Bay Area daily papers, six Bay Area AM radio stations, and all six Bay Area VHF television stations during the time period from Sunday, June 13, 1971, through Thursday, June 24, 1971. This purposive sample included the 11 media participating in the first part of the project. All non-advertising newspaper content was examined except obituaries, wedding and engagement announcements, comics, and the middle and end paragraphs of entertainment and sports stories. All non-advertising content within radio evening drive-time programming was examined, and all non-advertising content within television evening news programs was examined. In order to include a wide range of environmental issues and to obtain something approaching a complete collection of environmental stories, all items fitting within a broad definition of "environmental news" were coded. Two coders analyzed newspaper content, and nine coders analyzed broadcast content. The definition and coding sheets stood up to tests of validity and reliability.

The third part of the project was a backtracking-interview procedure used to determine, for particular stories containing environmental news and for environmental news stories in general, the sources of information and media gatekeeping processes involved. The 41 reporters and editors interviewed at the 25 media included environmental reporters, telegraph editors, business-finance editors and other editors who served as gatekeepers regarding environmental coverage. While most interviews included a discussion of environmental reporting, gatekeeping, and the influence of news sources, the backtracking component was central to each interview. The journalists were presented with the content analysis coding

sheets of the environmental stories carried by their medium during the June 13-24 time period. They detailed the sources of information used and the gatekeeping processes involved in the presentation of every story they knew to have been influenced by public relations efforts.

Results

The 11 reporters and editors who participated in the first part of this project received during the eight week period a total of 1,347 press releases and other material which they considered environmental. Nine of the 11 received more than 40 environmental releases, six received more than 70, and three received more than 200. Environment beat reporters generally received more environmental material than their non-beat counterparts working for similar media. Reporters on a regular beat made some efforts to be put on environmental mailing lists, and these efforts affected the amount of material they received. But the study found that similar amounts of environmental material could be obtained by any Bay Area journalist making a similar effort. The large, widely known daily newspapers received more releases than the small, little known papers. Only part of this difference was due to the fact that the large dailies employed widely known environment and science beat reporters while some of the smaller papers did not. The size of the newspaper also was an important factor.

The 11 reporters and editors received a total of 566 environmental releases from government agencies and officials. Nine received more from government than from any other kind of source. The journalists received 229 releases from pressure groups, 234 from other institutions such as universities, 175 from industry, and 140 from industry-related institutions. When the releases received by business editors are figured in, it is probable that media receive about as many environmental releases from industry and industry-related institutions

as they do from government sources. The reporters and editors generally received substantial amounts of public relations environmental material concerning local or regional issues (612 releases received), national or international issues (436), and state or regional issues (299).

Five of the 11 discarded less than half the items they received. Six regularly saved substantial numbers of items. (Five saved 39 or more.) Seven regularly used substantial numbers of releases. (Six used 12 or more items, and three of these journalists used more than 25.) Of the three newsmen who did not regularly save or use substantial numbers of releases, all either saved or used such material occasionally. During the study time period, the 11 journalists saved 268 environmental releases and used 192 environmental items.

Eight of the 11 used environmental releases concerning local or regional issues most often. Four used significantly more government items than releases from any other kind of source, and all but three used about as many government items as releases from any other kind of source. Three journalists used significantly more pressure group items than the combined number of items from industry, industry-related institutions, and other institutions. Judging by the comments written on the file folders, basic standards of newsworthiness were very important in determining what was thrown out and what was used. (They were not so important in determining what was saved—many reporters saved material with little news value.) Proximity was the standard of newsworthiness most frequently mentioned.

The content analysis, the second part of the project, found that the 25 Bay Area daily media carried 1,002 environmental stories during the 12-day period. Media with large news holes and large news staffs offered more environmental coverage than smaller media, but a number of case study comparisons (of news operations that were otherwise roughly identical) illustrated that reg-

ular environmental reporters can make a difference in local environmental coverage.

The press services and networks were important suppliers of environmental news. About two thirds of the media examined fit within the 25% to 60% range of dependence on wire services and networks that usually seemed to indicate a reasonable blend of service-supplied and locally originated environmental stories. The 25 media carried more than 100 stories on each of the following issues: conservation, land use, water quality and air quality. They carried less than 100 stories on recycling, environmental additives, management of energy-producing resources (this was before the oil crisis), environmental personnel, human population explosion and control, and noise pollution. Government sources were the sources of information most often identified within environmental news stories carried by the Bay Area media. Sources from other institutions, industry and pressure groups were also regularly identified.

An examination of the environmental stories obtained in this content analysis provided what appeared to be dozens of examples of public relations efforts. The backtracking-interview procedure, the third part of this project, was used to determine exactly which stories had been influenced by PR efforts.

The 41 interviewed reporters and editors, using the content analysis coding sheets, were able to provide information on 887 environmental items carried by the 25 media during the 12-day period. They found that 474 items were not wire service or network-supplied stories, or letters. They were able to provide information as to exactly which sources were used and which gatekeeping processes were involved in 200 of the 474 items that were not wire service or network-supplied, or letters. The reporters and editors found that 105 of these 200 stories had been influenced by public relations efforts. They reported that 46 of the 105 stories were rewritten press releases. Three stories came from

Business Wire, a PR press service, and two were films supplied by a news source. The journalists noted that no further research had been done for these 51 stories; only public relations material was used. They found that 26 stories came from telephone calls or personal contacts. Press releases influenced the remaining 28 items; in writing these stories the reporters did further research.

All the interviewed environmental reporters, business editors and other editors in charge of environmental coverage noted that they received public relations environmental releases. The reporters and editors frequently said that they considered releases concerning local environmental issues and government actions the most important kinds of environmental mail. Seventy-eight of the 105 stories influenced by PR efforts concerned local issues. Government sources were identified in 38 stories. Thirty-four came from pressure groups, 27 from industry and industry-related institutions and six from other institutions. Business editors were an exception in that they depended almost entirely on releases from industry and industry-related institutions.

The interviews showed that when the size and nature of the media were held constant, environment beat reporters tended to receive more public relations environmental material than reporters not on a regular beat. And in addition to bringing in environmental mail, beat reporters also provided informed evaluation of the mail. With more releases than other reporters and a good deal of time in which to put together environmental stories, regular environmental reporters not only produced many local environmental stories, but also, were more often influenced by public relations environmental material than reporters not on a regular beat. Of the 105 stories influenced by PR efforts, 65 were identified by the 10 regular environmental reporters who were interviewed. Furthermore, 18 of the 28 stories in which releases led to further research were identified by the beat reporters.

The environmental specialists also noted that they knew and used many environmental sources, and that many were local public relations personnel. The 10 regular environmental reporters identified 14 of the 26 stories that were influenced by telephone or personal contacts. Reporters and editors at media with no environment beat reporters remarked that they had too few environmental contacts.

The interviews showed that the regular environmental reporters kept track of environmental developments and were interested in doing stories on environmental issues. They often got ideas for enterprise stories and sometimes pushed their ideas for stories upward through the media gatekeeping process into print or onto the air. Although most had time available to originate stories, some had to notify their editors before they began work on enterprise stories, and almost all had to receive permission to undertake enterprise stories that might interfere with what were considered their normal responsibilities. Once an environmental specialist had completed the research and writing of an enterprise story, he or she almost always was able to push it upward through the remaining gates and into print or onto the air. Reporters who were not on regular environment beats almost always were simply assigned environmental stories by editors. Little or no push was involved in getting these assigned stories into print or on the air.

Bay Area telegraph editors appeared to class the environment as a "hot topic" and were likely to use environmental wire stories if they were newsworthy. Public relations efforts influenced some wire stories, but most apparently came from newspaper accounts. Some of these newspaper stories were themselves influenced by public relations environmental efforts.

The interviews showed that while Bay Area environmental reporters sometimes did investigative and adversary reporting, the typical reporter spent most of the time covering breaking sto-

ries, attending routine meetings and press conferences and rewriting press releases. Furthermore, the newspaper financial and real estate editors noted that all the stories whose sources they were able to identify were influenced by public relations or supplied by the wire services.

Summary and Conclusions

Public relations practitioners representing a variety of institutions and groups supplied San Francisco Bay Area media with a great deal of environmental information. The larger and better known the Bay Area medium, the greater the tendency to receive a very substantial amount of public relations environmental material, and newspapers received more environmental mail than broadcast stations. Environment beat reporters (who usually tried to be put on environmental mailing lists) tended to receive more environmental material than reporters not on a regular beat. Bay Area media received local, national and state releases concerning a variety of environmental issues from government, industry and industry-related institutions, citizen-action pressure groups, and other institutions (such as universities).

The easy way for a mass medium to cover the environment is to rely on information supplied by public relations and/or the wire services. Many Bay Area reporters and editors relied on public relations. Almost all the Bay Area media depended on the wire services. But the wire services generally relied on newspapers for environmental coverage, and since newspaper stories often were influenced by public relations efforts, wire service environmental stories apparently were similarly influenced. The editor who decided to use a wire story instead of a press release often was simply substituting one public relations-supplied story for another. This project's study of the disposition of public relations environmental material showed that in most cases Bay Area reporters and editors saved and/

or used large numbers of environmental releases. The backtracking-interview procedure was able to identify the sources of 200 of the 474 items that were not wire service or network-supplied, or letters, and the reporters and editors found that 53% of these 200 environmental stories had been influenced by public relations efforts.

Cutlip suggested that even more than 35% of the coverage of complex new areas such as science and health was supplied by public relations. This project showed that public relations efforts influenced at least 25% and perhaps as much as 50% of Bay Area environmental coverage. It is reasonable to estimate that about 40% of the environmental content of the Bay Area media came from public relations practitioners, and that about 20% consisted of rewritten press releases. When a journalist uses a press release to help investigate a story, he or she should not be accused of abandoning the job to the public relations professional, but when the reporter simply rewrites a press release or uses a PR wire story or film (as did journalists in 51 of 105 stories) it is the PR practitioner who is really covering the story.

The public relations environmental material that most often influenced Bay Area coverage concerned local issues or government actions. Some reporters used many pressure group releases, and business editors depended almost entirely on releases from industry and industry-related institutions. These findings are as expected. Local coverage is the primary business of most of these journalists, and most of them received more local or regional releases than state or national items. Government is an established area of coverage, many important Bay Area environmental stories were government stories, and government supplied the greatest number of press releases. Furthermore, the American mass media generally tend to rely on official sources. Tom Wicker has written:

The fundamental reliance of the American news media in my experience has been, with rare and honorable exceptions, on the statement by the official source, be it government or business or academic or whatever.⁵

This reliance on official sources in part explains why journalists are influenced by public relations efforts. Press releases are often statements by "official" spokesmen. Certainly this is true for government and university releases, and business leaders are the official sources for business editors. Citizen-action pressure groups fit the category Wicker titles "the other side," but some pressure groups are official sources for some environmental reporters.

Bay Area journalists tended to rely very heavily on "official" spokesmen. Many did not have the time needed to investigate environmental stories. Instead they relied on press releases, and rarely questioned the reliability of "official" spokesmen. They depended on government statements and some used pressure group statements to provide "the other side" of environmental controversies. The use of releases from various sources was a safe and easy way of assuring that all sides of environmental issues were represented. By presenting the "official" statements of conflicting sources, the Bay Area media provided a battlefield for the various sides of complex environmental questions.

This researcher suggests that mass media news staffs should include a regular environmental reporter who is given the time to analyze incoming environmental information and to do enterprise reporting. This reporter should first become expert in the field. He or she should work to be put on environmental mailing lists and to make environmental contacts. He or she should serve as an informed judge of environmental information, and should serve as a watchdog or critic of the various institutions and groups involved in environmental issues.

⁵Tom Wicker, "The greening of the press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1971, p. 7.

An environmental specialist can be of great value in achieving quality and quantity coverage. Bay Area environmental specialists received more environmental material than their non-beat counterparts working for similar media. Environment beat reporters knew and used many environmental sources. With more information and more time, environmental specialists produced more environmental stories than non-beat journalists. Specialists also were more often influenced by public relations than reporters not on a regular beat. But while specialists identified many of the stories influenced by public relations, they also identified many of the stories in which releases led to further research. Environmental specialists often got ideas for enterprise stories and sometimes pushed their ideas for stories upward through the media gatekeeping processes into print or on the air. Non-beat reporters rarely originated stories.

In the Bay Area, the employment of an environmental specialist led to increased and even improved environmental coverage, but it did not necessarily lead to adversary reporting. In the coverage of government, adversariness is highly valued, but the established American press is not generally a watchdog press.⁶ Cooperation rather than adversariness was characteristic of Bay Area environmental coverage during the study period. The industry spokesman was quoted. The pressure group spokesman was quoted. But there was little interpretation. Few journalists said they were suspicious of the official public version of a story. This researcher suggests that a healthy skepticism is needed to perform the

watchdog function, and that reporters should question the various institutions and groups involved in environmental issues.

Public relations efforts significantly influenced Bay Area environmental coverage. There is no reason to believe that the media today in other areas of the nation are not similarly influenced. Much of the environmental news business involves delivering the mail. When this mail is well-selected and well-edited, it can provide useful information. But when it is passed on verbatim, it may mislead and misinform. And while a balance of press releases is better than depending on one "official" source, it is no substitute for interpretive reporting.

The employment of an environmental specialist can help provide quality and quantity coverage, but it is impossible to say that an environment beat reporter should be hired before, say, an education specialist or urban affairs reporter. Mass media owners should be urged to spend as much money as is necessary for solid coverage of all areas of the news. Environmental news, including news about the management of energy-producing resources, deserves a share of the money. The environment is an important, complex area of news that can only be explained to the American public through enterprise and interpretive reporting.

⁶William L. Rivers, *The Adversaries* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. vii; James Reston, *The Artillery of the Press* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), pp. 63-4; Ferdinand Kuhn, "Blighted areas of our press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Summer 1966, pp. 5-10; Gerald M. Loeb, "Flaws in financial reporting," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Spring 1966, pp. 37-9; James A. Skardon, "The Apollo story: what the watchdogs missed," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 1967, pp. 11-12.

Self-Examination, a Press Virtue

► Whatever else one may say about the newspaper business, self-examination is one of its virtues. Searching questions about right conduct or wrong conduct are put whenever journalists gather.—
MARQUIS W. CHILDS, newspaper columnist