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Environmental Change and Security Program

The Future of Science and Environmental Journalism

Thursday, February 12, 2009

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Edited Transcript—Peter Dykstra

I wanted to thank a couple of groups for having me here at the Wilson Center, and one, of course, is the Center itself and Geoff's team -- terrific people doing important work. And the other one is CNN for agreeing to spare up the time for me to be here for a couple of months.

What we have seen and heard from Seth and Elizabeth and Jan is, I think, the sum total of what's going on with the beat, and where it and all journalism may be headed. And when Jan and I first spoke a couple of weeks ago, and I began to look at projects like *The Voice of San Diego*, I'm really impressed and more hopeful than I've been in quite some time, but that of course does not mean that it is in its entirety a happy situation.

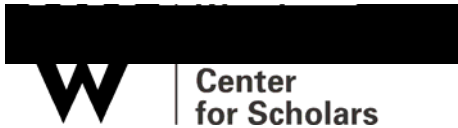
I wanted to talk a little bit about my end of it on the television, where we are, how I found myself where I am, with a situation after 17 years of not working at CNN, and that's something that I didn't take personally and I'm not terribly upset about, but at the same time, the beat and any full-time attention to science and environment were eliminated, and I thought that was a little astounding. It tends to get marginalized as a beat for a number of reasons, and I want to go over those very quickly.

Number one is factionalism. Environment coverage and even science coverage are often viewed as polarizing issues, either in the sense that it drives audience away because they don't care, or because issues like creation versus evolution -- which, as you know, is still a hotly contested issue in communities and churches across this country, even today on Darwin's 200th birthday -- will drive a fraction of the audience away if evolution is covered as a legitimate science and not as a political and theological controversy.

Environmental issues: about 20 percent of the American public -- it varies in polls -- still believes that global warming either just doesn't exist or is a hoax, or is some kind of a fiendish plot by scientists and NGOs, who are clearly in it for the money; to topple coal and oil companies, who clearly aren't in it for the money.

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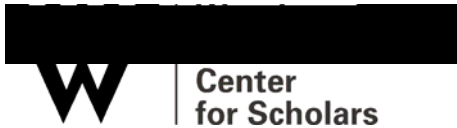
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And in the specific case of CNN, whom I still regard as far and away the best of the three competing national cable news networks in this country, if your primary competition is Fox News, it's a simple business decision. In order to compete and overtake Fox News, you don't need science and environment coverage on a regular basis. Ppete and4703nCC 10b76a/MC 13.24Q it's a si

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Female Speaker:

The astronaut with the diapers.

Peter Dykstra:

The astronaut who put on adult diapers and drove from Houston to Orlando in an attempt to kill her romantic rival. You are absolutely right. And the Mars Polar Lander was a distant second. Although I'm sure they would have flocked if they had that picture of Seth bouncing in the vomit comet. There is a science/wildlife/biology story that also ranked as the top scorer in the last couple of years. I'll give you a little bit of a hint, it happened about six or eight months ago. Anyone care to take a spin at what that may be?

Male Speaker:

The polar bear?

Peter Dykstra:

That's a reasonable guess, but not correct.

Male Speaker:

Was it Steve Irwin?

Peter Dykstra:

Steve Irwin -- I actually wasn't factoring Steve Irwin in. That was actually a wildlife-based murder. But yeah, if you were to broaden the category, you might well be right. But the one that I'm thinking about is the two security guards in Georgia who put a gorilla suit in the freezer and claimed to have discovered Big Foot. That was later found out to be a hoax. Now, that's journalism.

One other question, as we see newspapers in imperiled this very day, and as we see broadcast journalism as we now know it pondering its future and the possibility that it as we know it may be imperiled in five or ten years. Anyone care to guess what the average age of a viewer is for Fox or CNN?

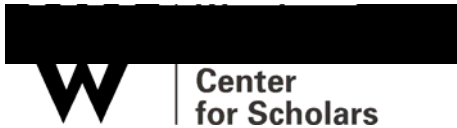
Male Speaker:

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Peter Dykstra:

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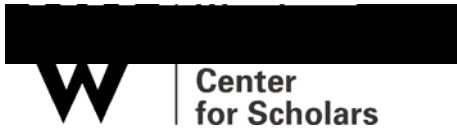
Okay. I heard a range from 43 to 80 here. You're all right to an extent. The correct answer is 60 for CNN and 59 for Fox. And if you tune in to the afternoon broadcast of either network -- or of MSNBC, which I believe is a little bit lower than that, maybe 58 -- you will see a profusion of commercials for denture cream, adult diapers -- perhaps even the ones the astronaut was wearing -- and life insurance, and the little "I've fallen and I can't get up thing" that's always on TV.

Another troubling aspect that crosses all media and looks to our futures, and I've had four or five separate conversations with journalism professors at different universities across this country who said to me some variation of "We don't know what we're supposed to teach anymore." Clearly it's not to push prospective students to careers in traditional newspapers. But I think there's a real reformation that is going on and that is needed in journalism programs and campuses. That is why it's wonderful to see, amidst the hand wringing, to see a research and development facility -- if I may call it that, Jan -- that's looking toward our future, and looking toward our future with some optimism. Because as bad as the picture is - - and if you point at environment journalism in particular as a marginal beat in the eyes of many of our bosses and editors, you'll see peaks and valleys of interest and disinterest in coverage.

The first one that I can recall in my lifetime is around 1970. In '69, there was a massive oil spill off of Santa Barbara, California that not only was an ecological disaster in its own right, but it was a telegenic ecological disaster because it was right on the beach near a major media market, and in a way that made available pictures that told the story in a very tragic way. That same year the Cuyahoga River caught fire and burned. It was actually the tenth time in history that the Cuyahoga River had caught fire and burned, but it was the first time that it appeared widely in television and that it sparked a national debate about water quality. Within a year we had our first Earth Day in

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Ann Gorsuch and James Watt to the EPA and the Interior Department. As great changes were underfoot and there was a resurgence of activism and concern, the beat was elevated once more.

That, too, went away. By the end of that decade in 1990 we had seen Bhopal and Chernobyl, and the first reports from Hanson and others - dire reports about climate change -- the first dire reports about the ozone hole; a very telegenic, again, story about medical waste on the beaches of New Jersey and New York. And by 1990, Earth Day was, again, ascendant. NGOs saw tremendous rise in their public support, and Earth Day was a two-hour prime time TV special on ABC hosted by Bette Midler.

That, too, waned. In the meantime, we saw an event that distracted all of America and perhaps all of the world from attention to many issues, and that was September 11th and the War on Terror. I had been at CNN for about ten years at that point. I found myself relocated to running the military desk and supervising an element of war coverage for both the Afghan invasion and the war in Iraq, or at least the “Mission Accomplished” portion of the war in Iraq.

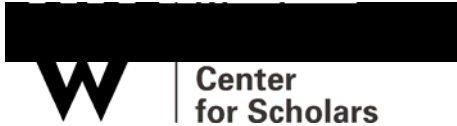
But around 2005, 2006, spurred on by questions about Katrina's potential link to global warming, and a renewed interest as evidenced by Al Gore winning an Emmy, an Oscar, a Grammy, and a Nobel Peace Prize all in the same year while talking about climate change, there was again a brief resurgence that was experienced in news organizations. That has died out in a hurry due to the economic meltdown. You may recall a little less than a year ago, as we were pondering the impact of \$4-a-gallon gasoline, there was an increased attention to alternative energy. That seems to have died out.

So what we're dealing with on this beat is sort of this manic-depressive mode of public attention where we have those parabolas, just like on Seth's plane, where attention rises and wanes. That's a challenge for coverage. It's certainly a challenge, I'm sure, from the standpoint of policymakers, but the issues certainly are not going away. They may be presented in a different context, as we see with the change in presidential administration, but they're not going away.

Right now, as was mentioned before -- I do have to correct Seth. He described me in his slide as a former management flunky at CNN. The industry term, correctly, Seth, is management weasel.

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That's just a broadcast term, but that's what we did call it. Right now I'm writing for a web site, *MNN.com*, three columns a week. Tomorrow I'll write, actually, based on a session here at the Wilson Center a week ago, on water; Peter Gleick, who for years has been a brilliant analyst of some of the crises facing the world from lack of clean water and in some cases the absence of water. And yesterday I wrote on a green jobs conference that was held here in Washington, where I had an encounter with Jimmy Hoffa. Not the dead one, the son of the dead one, as the Teamsters Union has now joined an alliance, a growing alliance between trade unions and environmentalists in pursuit of a piece of the recovery pie and a piece of the green jobs opportunities that are out there. Those things represent emerging beats that need to be covered.

I'm having a great time writing for this Web site. I also have concern about the new dichotomy of the media, and that is that a Web site on any specialized topic, whether it's a sports Web site, or a science Web site, or an environment Web site, tends to draw those who choose to be engaged rather than drawing an audience of the general public, which is what institutions like the Associated Press or NPR or CNN have always done. And in a sense, to the extent that our mission as journalists is to inform and to educate, it may leave us primarily educating those who are already relatively educated, and leaving those who may not be so educated in the dark. I hope we can find a way around that. I think the projects that Jan is assisting and advising and shepherding are a great start. But we've got a long, long way to go. Thanks.

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