Does the Press Shape or Reflect National Values?

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It is hard to imagine a broader question. . .or one that is easier to answer. . .or one that the answer to which is less open to proof or refutation. So, thanks for lobbing me this easy pitch.

The answer is yes. The press does both. But you already knew that. It is obvious.

The press does not operate in a vacuum. Writers and editors write and edit based on what they know and how they feel. And that *has* to be influenced greatly by the social environment in which we all live.

At the same time, our communities work partly based on the exchange of news and information, which the press makes possible on a large scale. Thus, the press cannot help but shape how the community reacts and, in some cases, what it does.

Two years ago the Oregon press reported the first execution in the state in 34 years. The coverage was straightforward, with the theme that the killer pretty much deserved what he got. Editorial opinion said about the same thing.

Did that shape the way the public regarded the news? Or, did it reflect the public's view? Maybe there's a way to test which it was. But does it matter?

It so happens that between 70 and 80 percent of Oregon voters are said to support the death penalty. So, the tone of the coverage no doubt met with widespread satisfaction and consent.

In the case of capital punishment, it is tempting to conclude that the press reflected, rather than guided the public's values and opinion. In fact, we can assume this because we know from other sources that a majority of journalists are inclined toward the liberal view, which generally holds that the death penalty is wrong.

At the same time, public opinion of the correctness of the execution no doubt was strengthened by the facts as reported in the press. These facts included: (1) that the condemned man was convicted of three killings after serving prison time for two previous murders and then being released; (2) that he had accepted his punishment and refused to appeal; and (3) that days before the execution he had confessed to kidnapping, molesting and then murdering a 10-year-old boy some dozen years before.

The correctness of the procedure was affirmed again in the man's final moments.

Four press witnesses at the execution all reported that his last words were mouthed or spoken toward the witness who was the mother of one of his victims. "I'm sorry," the condemned man said.

Press coverage and public opinion were pretty much united in this case, and it is hard to prove that one reflected the other. But, again, it is my impression they each reflected the other, like two mirrors set face to face.

More interesting is the question of the role of the press in any debate about national policy on resource issues, such as the management of public lands. I'm not sure the proper role of the press is always apparent, but I know what it should be. It should be to report the news, to raise questions and to dig up facts that help the public arrive at reasonable answers. All too often, I fear, the press falls down in that role. All too often, the press seems merely to reflect what it considers to be the prevailing public view, instead of taking a contrary approach.

It is hard to talk about the press as a whole and make any sense. The many parts of the press differ greatly—not only in size but also in what they do, how they do it and what influence they have. This is most obvious in the division between the electronic and the printed press. But it also is true among the different players in the printed press, from metropolitan dailies with a million or more subscribers to country weeklies with a few thousand.

I look at the press from the standpoint of a small daily newspaper in Oregon. I should give you a few words of background in order to explain my vantage point.

The newspaper where I work as editor is published every afternoon except Sunday and has a circulation of a bit more than 21,000. Copies of our paper typically run from 20 to 32 pages. Our news staff is proportionate to the size of the paper, consisting of the equivalent of 20 full-time employees. Six or seven of these are reporters. The others take photos, edit copy, lay out pages and handle various other chores. Recently we have ventured into presenting news and advertising in the form of a web page on the Internet.

My own job is to manage the newsroom (with the help of a very energetic managing editor), to write editorials and to edit the opinion page. I also do some reporting and editing of the local and state news. In addition (more or less as a gag), I present a brief daily commentary on a local radio station. Occasionally, I also have been a "talking head"—that is, a guest on a public affairs discussion on Oregon public television.

The community where we publish is the county seat of Linn County, a county with a population of just under 100,000. The county reaches from the Willamette River to the top of the Cascade Mountains. Its eastern half is heavily timbered, and much of that timberland is under federal control—much of it as part of the Willamette National Forest.

The principal industries besides retail and other general services are lumber and wood products, food processing, and special metals such as titanium and zirconium. Much of the valley portion of the county is covered by vast expanses of fields, where grass is grown for seed. We are 10 miles away from Corvallis, the seat of Oregon State University and one of Oregon's growing centers of the electronics industry.

That's the scene from which I see the world and have formed my own, no doubt limited picture of the press and how it performs.

The Spotted Owl

One of the big national stories of the last few years has been the environment generally—and especially the management of the large federal land holdings in the Pacific Northwest.

The story began in the 1970s with efforts to identify and then set aside the major remaining parts of federal forests that had not yet been cut up by roads. Then came the Reagan administration's perceived indifference to environmental concerns. This, in turn, produced a resurgence of the environmental movement, which focused on the preservation of the so-called old-growth forests as its chief goal in our region.

Environmentalists went to court in the late 1980s and early 1990s and soon began winning injunctions and rulings that barred federal timber sales in much of the Northwest. Their principal tool was the northern spotted owl—a friendly, but relatively rare little bird that lives in the forests of northern California, western Oregon and Washington. The Reagan administration had rejected a petition to declare the owl threatened. But, this decision was overturned in court, and the owl now has been on the list of threatened species for some time.

Over the years, the news and commentary on all of this have, I believe, created the impression among the American public that the last great forests of the country were about to be liquidated by a greedy timber industry and that only the stalwart opposition of the environmental movement prevented the damage from becoming even worse.

Not long ago a reader was trying to persuade me that I'm wrong on the issue of forests. She e-mailed me a copy of an article by a well-known outdoors writer. It had appeared—apparently in August—on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. The dateline was a place in Montana, and this was the lead paragraph:

> I love my valley. I love the last few dark, shadowy corners of national forests that have not had roads built into them. But now the Washington politicians (over the efforts of a courageous few) have turned vast new acreages of our public wildlands over to the timber industry, and I am watching truckload after truckload of healthy green timber roll out of the valley, while the last roadless areas are threatened as never before.

Now, maybe Montana is a special case, but I doubt it. Most likely, the national forests there are treated about the same as the national forests in Oregon.

We also have to make allowances for poetic license on the opinion pages of a major paper. But I don't doubt for a minute that most of the readers of the *Times* got the impression the columnist and the editors wanted to leave. The impression is that the country's last virgin forests are about to fall to bulldozers and chainsaws.

This impression is wrong. It's the result of a general, near-total absence of factual background in news coverage. It is exacerbated by almost complete ignorance among the general public—especially in the East and all across the suburbs of America—of modern resource industries such as lumber and wood products. This leaves the field wide open for decisions based only on feelings and emotions.

Nobody likes to see a big old tree come crashing down. Nobody (except maybe a professional timber manager) likes to see a whole hillside of dirt, stripped completely bare of trees. But these are the images—trees crashing down, vistas of nothing but stumps—that have been shown on television and in the press for many years.

What the public does not see is that within five to 10 years of a timber sale's being clearcut, properly managed land supports a healthy forest of good-sized trees. And, if you go into a clearcut 20 years later, you are surrounded by stately conifers on all sides.

A few years ago, an Oregon paper published an aerial photograph of private timberlands that were completely cut over. It showed mile after mile of brown hillsides, as far as the eye could reach.

I wondered if any timber company could be that insensitive, so took a tour of the place on the ground. What I found was that the entire area had been replanted and almost all of it sported trees from knee-high to 30 feet tall.

Don't trust aerial photographs to show true conditions on the ground. The same caveat applies, by the way, to looking out of an airplane while cruising over the Cascades at 15 or 20,000 feet. The place looks bare in spots, but it's not as bare as it looks.

As for old growth's disappearing from the national forests, it is not. Admittedly, "old growth" is a vague term that covers various definitions. But, according to a 1994 summary based on U.S. Forest Service numbers and published by the Oregon forest industry, about 4.3 million acres or one-third of the entire national forest land base in Oregon met one of the various definitions.

Of that, more than half was in designated wilderness areas or otherwise set aside. Keep in mind, too, that more than half of the national forests in Oregon were considered to be mature stands—which sooner or later will acquire old-growth characteristics, if for no other reason than the passage of time.

Has anything like that been prominently reported in the national press? I don't think so.

Much of the timber controversy centered on the northern spotted owl as an unwitting, but important player. The owl is said to survive best in forests with old-growth characteristics—meaning a high canopy, towering over a layer of brush and small trees—affording cover from other birds of prey and plenty of space for the owl to fly around between the trees and hunt for its food, mainly mice and voles.

The government counts the owls by calling for them and luring them with mice that biologists hold up in the air. So, you can imagine there's quite a bit of uncertainty about how many owls there really are. After all, what if an owl doesn't hear the call? Estimates range around 3,000 or 4,000 pairs, but this number is highly suspect.

For most people, the thing that would be central to any determination of whether the owls' survival as a subspecies is threatened is this question: "How many owls are there. . .and where. . .and are they breeding?" In the timber debate, however, that question has been sidestepped. Biologists have convinced themselves the owls need old growth as preferred habitat. And, if that habitat shrinks, the owls will be threatened. The biologists ignore or discount numerous sightings that suggest the owls also thrive in forests that are not old-growth, but exhibit similar characteristics, including good cover and plenty of prey. The whole foundation of the current Northwest forest plan, which sharply limits logging, may well be based on a flawed theory concerning the owls.

You have not read much about this, I would guess. My theory is, this is because the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* are not based in places where the lumber industry is very important to the economy. It has been much easier there to "go with your instincts"—which tell you that cutting down trees in order to turn them into plywood has to be bad.

The same tone has been evident in news coverage about the so-called timber rider, passed by Congress in 1995. This amendment to an appropriations bill called on the Forest Service to make a number of timber sales where trees were dead or dying, due to fire, disease or insect damage. To hasten the sales, Congress provided for a streamlined appeals procedure before the federal district courts.

In Oregon, the rider also contained a provision releasing a number of timber sales that were awarded in about 1990, but then withdrawn under court order as a result of injunctions issued in the spotted owl suits. In general, these were sales of old-growth Douglas fir and some other species. They had met the environmental laws of the time—1989 or so, hardly a period of no environmental laws. Buyers had paid for the trees, but then could not cut the timber.

Meanwhile, in one little mill town after another, mills were closing.

But in 1995, the Republicans in Congress saw a chance to save some jobs. They ordered the sales released.

This was the situation. And the solution sounded not unreasonable to anyone familiar with the background. That's why President Clinton also signed the legislation. It was a matter of making good on a number of sales for which contracts already had been signed years ago.

But, in parts of the press, the rider has been described as opening the door for timber barons to rape the last remnants of ancient forests. The rider, by the way, prompted that op-ed piece in the Times.

The Superfund

News coverage from Washington lately has conveyed this theme: Law changes proposed by the Republicans would relax some of our most important antipollution laws and thus would be harmful to the environment.

You don't often see stories that question how some of these laws have worked or how much they have cost in relation to how much benefit they have produced. If you follow stories about the federal Superfund program to clean up hazardous waste sites, for example, you get the clear impression that anybody wanting to change the law has to be a polluter or be in favor of pollution. No wonder it has proved so hard to change the law.

Our paper has been reporting on one Superfund case in our own backyard. Earlier studies done at the behest of the state legislature had shown it was practically no risk to people or the environment off site. But in 1983, the sprawling factory site of an Albany metal producer was listed on a national priority list of known or suspected waste sites in need of further study. This plant is a going concern, operated until recently by Teledyne, Inc., and now a part of Allegheny Teledyne. It is not an abandoned site, and the costs of dealing with the situation have been borne by the company itself.

As part of the process, some waste ponds were cleaned up by trucking the sludge they contained to a site hundreds of miles away in north-central Oregon and putting it in a lined and covered structure at a cost of more than $10 million. But, as for the main site, the cleanup has yet to begin.

The average taxpayer has to ask: If it's such a serious situation, why spend 13 years on studies and such before taking some drastic action? And if it's not serious, why spend millions upon millions of dollars on this issue? Either way, the Superfund program clearly could be made to work more quickly or efficiently.

But, in the press, anyone wanting to bring that about is described as a corporate polluter. Surely we can do better than that by just sticking with the facts.

But then there are other examples of times the press could have done better by concentrating on facts. Here's just one from recent experience.

Land Use and Growth

In Oregon, the microchip and computer industry has fairly ballooned in recent years. The result has been population growth and housing construction, the likes of which were last seen in the 1970s and are outside most people's memory.

For the first time, we are seeing traffic jams on some of our roads. Some of us envision our becoming another megalopolis, choking on smoke. Already, voices are being heard to say we have to find ways to stop this growth, which seems to be gobbling up the countryside wherever you look.

But the facts are not that grim—as the chief of the state Land Conservation and Development Department pointed out in a letter to our paper. Oregon has established urban growth boundaries as part of its elaborate land-use planning process. And, as the state official pointed out, almost all the construction lately has taken place inside those boundaries—just as planned and intended. For the most part, expansions of the growth boundaries have not taken place.

The perception was one thing. The facts were something else. The press—including my own paper and my own writings—might have done a better job of pointing this out. We might have saved some people a great deal of anxiety.

What Can We Do? How Can You Help?

It seems to me that state universities and their Extension Services and agents are in a very good position to help keep the press balanced by presenting it with facts that bear on current topics of public interest. You have the resources—in the form of current research and existing data bases—to clear up misconceptions the press and the public may have.

But I sense two problems: (1) a reluctance to project your institutions into the public limelight and possible controversy and (2) a tendency to couch everything smacking of science in terms so guarded and tentative that nobody at the local paper or TV station thinks the information is news—or, can understand it.

My advice, in case you ask, is to be bold. Ignore the brickbats that may fly your way. Be aggressive in laying out facts, especially if they go against the drift of public sentiment. Go to the local paper and say you have important information that will shed a different light on what its staff has been hearing and passing on. Present your data simply, so a harried local editor can grasp in seconds the import of what you are saying.

Unless the editor is totally beyond redemption, you will be received with open arms and an open mind.

The 1996 Farm Bill: Implications for Farmers, Families, Consumers and Rural Communities