

**Freedom of Access To Information is Recognized as a Human Right;  
But what about Freedom From Exposure to Disinformation?!**

*Overtime Address by Rick Crawford to the Plenary Session of the  
First Interdisciplinary Conference on Earth Rights and Responsibilities:  
The Confluence of Human Rights and Environmental Protection (1992, Yale)*

Oannes Arthur Pritzker (Native American journalist and biologist) noted the sorry history of US adherence to its past treaties with Indian nations. Yet other people here today devote their entire lives to fighting for certain words on pieces of legal paper. *Do words have power? Whence comes the force of law?*

As Tony Simpson (Australian human/environmental rights attorney) and Lalanath DeSilva (Sri Lankan environmentalist and attorney) have emphasized earlier, the *only* enforcement mechanism for any law is ultimately *moral force* — the “shame factor”. *That moral force stems from people’s values, and from their ability to communicate with one another.* Thus wherever human values are under assault, or people’s ability to communicate is impeded, the moral power that guards both human and environmental rights is weakened. Today, I want to speak about the mainstream mass media — how their current structure is actually preventing human communication, and is gradually degrading human values.

Ask yourself this question: “How do you come to know that an abuse of human rights or the environment has occurred?” Most people gain such information *indirectly*, via a chain of news media. If you’ve read “The Media Monopoly” by Ben Bagdikian, you’re aware of the centralization of most major news media (including TV, newspapers, magazines, and books) under the control of a few large multinational corporations. And what about the wire services that propagate news reports to the media? Fully 96% of the *worldwide* daily volume of news is controlled by just 5 wire services! Increasingly, freedom of the press is restricted to those who *own* the mainstream press.

Many flagrant human rights abuses, such as torture, are done for purposes of control. Often the goal is to control the flow of information — because knowledge is *power*. An individual may be tortured to *extract* information, or they may be tortured as an object lesson to others — to *prevent* those others from communicating certain kinds of information.

Earlier, I asked how you came to know that an abuse had occurred. Now I ask: “How do you know that an abuse has *not* occurred, merely because it has not been reported *as such* by the major press?” Knowledge is power — the power for *change*. Those in powerful institutions maintain their power not only by restricting the flow of information, but increasingly, by controlling the flows of *disinformation*.

We see disinformation in “greenscam” advertising — false and misleading claims designed to change people’s behavior, and undermine their *values*. But the most significant recent example of a massive and successful disinformation campaign was the Gulf War — the majority of Americans were controlled by mass media disinformation more effectively than they could ever have been controlled by physical torture. By restricting the American people’s access to information, and especially by exposing them to disinformation, their *moral force* was illegitimately hijacked, resulting in the slaughter of more than 100,000 Iraqi people — innocent women and children, and male conscripts forced at gunpoint to fight.

The most secure prison is one where the inmates *think* they’re free — because then they won’t even try to escape. Many Third World people know they’re held captive, so they fight to be free. But most Americans don’t even know they’re still *prisoners of disinformation*.

## Other Frames for Environmental Coverage

*Political Stalemate.* U.S. reporting sometimes seemed less about the environment than a rampant political force called environmentalism. Using a vocabulary of antagonism (in particular, constant use of the term "battle" and summing up issues in terms of "winners" and "losers"), the media emphasized controversy and polarized environmental debates into environmentalism vs. status quo, animal vs. human, ecology vs. economy.

This conveyed the implication that various environmental issues are at an impasse or stalemate that can only be overcome if each "side" will "give ground." This emphasis on compromise between two rigid extremes obscures other perspectives and alternatives.

*Ethnocentrism.* No environmental problem is uniquely American. One nation's environmental contaminants and degradation—from pesticides and ocean dumping to deforestation—impacts many other nations and the Earth

as a whole. Yet U.S. environment stories were typically told from an isolationist perspective, as if they were America's private concern. (**Time** and **Christian Science Monitor** usually strove to portray the larger planetary context.)

There was little discussion of where the U.S. fits in the greater ecological scheme of things—such as the fact, cited in **Time**'s "Planet-Saving Report Card" (4/20/90), that the nation is "a primary producer of CO<sub>2</sub>" and "the world's biggest per capita garbage producer." Comparisons of U.S. environmental solutions with those of other countries (and the fact that in some areas we lag far behind) got only passing references. The U.S. role as superpower that can set a global agenda was barely touched on. One exception was Bush's "foot-dragging" (**Christian Science Monitor**) on the greenhouse effect. (The global economy did appear in a couple of April 1991 stories—e.g., "Environment Versus Freer Trade: Protecting the Ecology Sometimes Creates Unfair Competition," **New York Times**, 2/11/91.)

*Anthropocentrism.* As well, U.S. environmental stories tended to separate humans from their environment, pitting civilization against nature rather than as part of it. A **New York Times** article (4/24/90) on the proliferation of lawsuits over the classification of farmland as wetlands barely mentioned why wetlands need protection. A **CBS** segment (4/16/90) on a landmark Supreme Court case over developing public lands was framed as a "confrontation" between business and environmental groups that want to preserve wild places so "their members" can use it for recreation. In the segment, an interior department spokesperson called environmentalists a "special interest group" with no standing.

## Sources

Although the issues were presented as highly polarized, the sources chosen to represent each side were seldom very much so—no Earth Firsters vs. James Watt, for example. Most quoted sources, including the environmentalists, were from groups the media carefully identified as "mainstream."

## Caution: Environmental Reporting Can Be Hazardous to Your Career

Glynn Wilson, an award-winning reporter for the **Islander**, part of a chain of small newspapers serving the Gulf Coast of Alabama, never thought covering the environment beat would get him into trouble. "Over the last three years," Wilson told **EXTRA!**, "I have done a tremendous amount of environmental reporting and gotten a tremendous amount of public support."

But when Wilson started covering EMPRESS II, a Navy research project in the Gulf of Mexico that would simulate the electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear bomb, he learned that there are some toes that can't be stepped on. After writing a three-part series (**Islander**, 12/21/91, 12/28/91, 1/1/92) on the possible health and environmental consequences of the project, he took a vacation; he returned to find that his desk had been taken over by a newly hired editor, an ex-Navy officer with an intelligence background.

The new editor told Wilson that his series was "garbage" and that the paper had received "a number of complaints" about it, although public response was heavily positive. Wilson began hearing that local Republican officials were telling the **Islander**'s publisher they were unhappy about his reporting. The last straw came when Wilson wrote an article on Alabama's U.S. representatives (2/19/92) headlined, "Alabama Delegation Gets 'F' on Environmental Scorecard." That same day, he was given written notice that he was fired; in the space provided for an explanation, his termination slip was marked "no information provided."

Wilson is only one environmental reporter who has riled sacred cows. David Mitchell, managing editor of the **New Mexican**, was dismissed after the paper ran an expose of nuclear contamination at Los Alamos laboratories (**EXTRA!**, Nov/Dec '91). The Montana **Missoulan** took Richard Manning off the environmental beat after timber companies criticized his series on timber clearcutting. The series won an award for investigative journalism, but Manning left the paper to write *Last Stand: Logging, Journalism and the Case for Humility* (Peregrine Smith Books).

One reason smaller papers are vulnerable to pressure on environmental issues is that the area they report on is often dependent on one or two key industries. "Newspapers...are loath to criticize the heart of the local economy," Manning argues (**E Magazine**, 3-4/92).

But it isn't only journalists at little papers who have to be careful: Phil Shabecoff, who covered the environment for the **New York Times** for 14 years, left the paper after being switched to the IRS beat. "I was told my coverage was considered pro-environment, whatever that means," Shabecoff told the **Washington Post** (5/6/91). The only example the **Times** gave him of what he was doing wrong: He used the word "slaughter" to describe the mass killing of dolphins.

—FAIR