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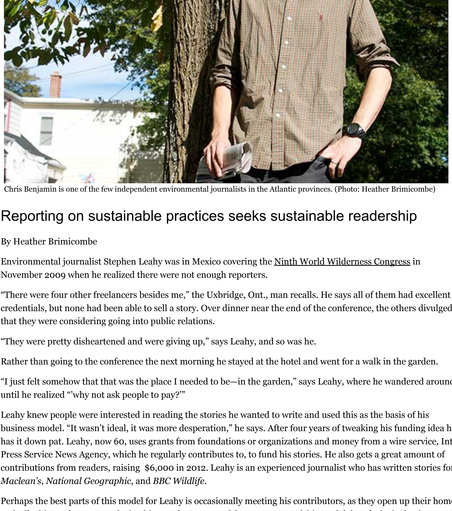
The enviro beat: online and independent



Chris Benjamin is one of the few independent environmental journalists in the Atlantic provinces. (Photo: Heather Brimicombe)

Reporting on sustainable practices seeks sustainable readership

By Heather Brimicombe

Environmental journalist Stephen Leahy was in Mexico covering the Ninth World Wilderness Congress in November 2009 when he realized there were not enough reporters.

"There were four other freelancers besides me," the Uxbridge, Ont., man recalls. He says all of them had excellent credentials, but none had been able to sell a story. Over dinner near the end of the conference, the others divulged that they were considering going into public relations.

"They were pretty disheartened and were giving up," says Leahy, and so was he.

Rather than going to the conference the next morning he stayed at the hotel and went for a walk in the garden.

"I just felt somehow that that was the place I needed to be—in the garden," says Leahy, where he wandered around until he realized "'why not ask people to pay?'"

Leahy knew people were interested in reading the stories he wanted to write and used this as the basis of his business model. "It wasn't ideal, it was more desperation," he says. After four years of tweaking his funding idea he has it down pat. Leahy, now 60, uses grants from foundations or organizations and money from a wire service, Inter Press Service News Agency, which he regularly contributes to, to fund his stories. He also gets a great amount of contributions from readers, raising $6,000 in 2012. Leahy is an experienced journalist who has written stories for *Maclean's*, *National Geographic*, and *BBC Wildlife*.

Perhaps the best parts of this model for Leahy is occasionally meeting his contributors, as they open up their homes and offer him a place to stay during his travels. But one of the worst parts of this model, he admits is "having to ask for money." Speaking slowly he continues, "It was tough the first year."

From the demise of the *New York Times*' Green Blog to the ending of *Sustainable City*, the *Coast*'s environmental column, some mainstream media are devoting fewer reporters and less space to environmental issues. But environmental journalism is finding a place on the Internet, where independent journalists, like Leahy, are publishing stories they believe other media ignore.

The Daily Climate is an independent, online aggregation of climate change stories. It is a publication of Environmental Health Sciences, based in Charlottesville, Virginia. Its foundation and leadership includes former Greenpeace and National Audubon Society executives. According to a Daily Climate recap of 2012 coverage, the peak year for stories about climate change was 2009, when roughly 11,000 journalists filed 32,400 stories. In 2012 the numbers are far lower, with 7,194 reporters filing 18,546 stories. Decline since 2009 has been steady, with 2011 and 2012 showing a two per cent decrease.

Leahy points to the *New York Times* as an example of this decrease, when it closed its environmental desk this year, causing nine reporters and editors to retire or be reassigned. He also points out that he is unaware of a single Canadian newspaper that devotes a reporter to environmental issues full time.

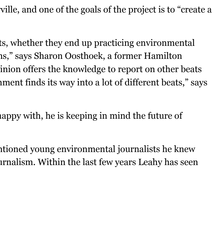
In the heat of the environmental movement more stories were published. Greenpeace, the iconic environmental activist group "invented environmental journalism," says Alanna Mitchell an award-winning author and journalist, who says, "environmental reporting isn't what it was in the '70s or '80s." Mitchell is a former *Globe and Mail* reporter who followed an earth sciences beat in the late '90s and early 2000s. She has also written a bestselling book, *Sea Sick: The Global Ocean in Crisis*.

Chris Benjamin, a Halifax journalist who previously wrote a column called *Sustainable City* in the *Coast* elaborated, "they blur the line between activist and journalist." The organization managed this by filming and editing the only footage available to the press.

During the movement, organizations such as the Society for Environmental Journalists (SEJ) were formed to accommodate the environmental reporters that could be found at nearly every newspaper, and some local broadcast stations. When the SEJ, of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, began in 1990 the membership was at 125, eventually reaching 1,000 members in 1998. The highest rate of membership was in 2009 with 1,500 members, dropping back to 1,300 the next year and holding that number up to 2013. Students held a portion of these numbers due to teachers encouraging budding environmental reporters to get involved. Through these years more of the journalists within the society are moving towards freelancing, which has kept their membership numbers up.

"Putrid," is how Elizabeth May, leader of the federal Green Party, describes the mainstream coverage of environmental matters. On September 16, 2013 May spoke at the Stand up for Science rally at Dalhousie University, one of 17 events across the country spearheaded by Evidence for Democracy, a science advocacy organization. During her talk May lamented the media not covering the right stories.

Dr. Philip Kitcher, who spoke at Dalhousie University about how we can sustain both democracy and the planet, says the media has gone "from being a vehicle that provides information, to being a vehicle that provides market share." Kitcher has his PhD in history and philosophy of science and he's a professor at Columbia University. He has also written a number of books and articles including *In Mendel's Mirror: Philosophical Reflections on Biology*.



Dr. Philip Kitcher at Dalhousie University. (Photo: Heather Brimicombe)

The media started taking notice of autonomous environmental journalism when an independent publication, Inside Climate News, won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in National Reporting for its coverage of an oil spill disaster. The spill was in Talmadge Creek and the Kalamazoo River, near Marshall, a community in southwestern Michigan. A tear in an Enbridge Energy Partners pipeline, a Canadian company with American branches, caused the release of diluted bitumen, or dilbit, into the surrounding environment. As a result of the July 25, 2010 spill 150 families were moved permanently from their homes. The articles were compiled into an eBook, *The Dilbit Disaster: Inside the Biggest Oil Spill You've Never Heard Of*. Not only does Inside Climate News function without a physical newsroom, but it's also funded primarily by grants from charitable foundations and reader donations.

"As the news industry finds its way into an uncertain future," wrote David Sassoon, founder and publisher of Inside Climate News, over email. "Small organizations like ours will have the opportunity to fill the gaps that are getting bigger every day."

Autonomous online publications such as Grist.org have figured out how to successfully support themselves. Started by Chip Giller in 1999, this self-sustaining Seattle online publication relies on contributions from readers, as well as foundations, donors and some advertising. To set itself apart from the rest of environmental journalism, Grist uses humour to lighten up what is usually a pretty bleak beat.

"I think that is one of our prime strengths," says Ted Alvarez, managing editor at Grist. "It has resonated with people who would not typically call themselves environmentalists... humour is an essential gateway drug toward getting people to care about something, no matter what you are talking about, but especially with the environment."

Some of Grist's humour includes a story written about a study to see if tweets read out loud effect plant growth, encouraging readers to tweet at a plant to help the study. Being funny isn't all fun and games though.

"Being humorous is extremely difficult," explains Alvarez, "I would like to think that we can succeed a couple times a day, you know, and we can stay true to that."

Sustaining readership as well as funding is an ongoing struggle for autonomous journalists. "It's just a tough market," says Chris Benjamin, former *Coast* columnist and one of the few environmental reporters in the Atlantic provinces. The market Benjamin refers to is the job market in Nova Scotia, which is harsh, especially for journalists.

Workshops like the Flag It project, funded by the European Commission, help green journalists hone their skills. Gustavo Faleiros, who facilitates the data journalism workshop, teaches aspiring and accomplished environmental journalists how to use readily available data. Using the data they learn to create comprehensive maps of areas and attach stories as well as photographs to them. Data journalism can be used for many topics in journalism and is based on using data and mediums like maps to support claims or help tell the story.

"I saw some of the content that was coming in with the new Google Earth," says Faleiros who describes the first time he used data for environmental journalism as "amazing." For instance, journalists can create layered data maps to show change, industry, or a collective story in different areas. Some of the tools they use include Google Earth and iD Open Street Map editor.

"We look over issues in a conceptual way," says Faleiros. This project is primarily focused on the advancement of data environmental journalism. It's purpose is to set new journalists in motion to be able to cover the environment with a fresh perspective.

> "We're hoping to get youth to think critically about the environment"
> —Jen Mayville, Environmental Defence

Formal educational programs for environmental journalists are also available, especially in the United States. Degrees in environmental journalism are available at schools such as the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, and the University of Colorado have created programs to cater to the specific needs of this complicated beat. Requirements of the environmental beat include extensive and broad knowledge about the environment and how it works.

More informal programs are also being run to encourage young journalists. Canada's Next Green Journalist is a contest run by Environmental Defence on behalf of the Foundation for Environmental Education.

"We're hoping to get youth to think critically about the environment," says Jen Mayville, communication manager for Environmental Defence, a non-partisan environmental charity based in Toronto. The contest is open to Canadians 11 to 21 and simply requires entrants to write, create a video, or take photos on the provided environmental subject. In 2013 the competition asked entrants for a litter or waste management solution. With almost 100 submissions from across the country, students had the opportunity to win laptops, cameras, and video cameras to further their work.

"The environment is something we take for granted," says Mayville, and one of the goals of the project is to "create a next generation of environmental leaders."

"I think that those programs are excellent in training journalists, whether they end up practicing environmental journalism or not, look at stories through an environmental lens," says Sharon Oosthoek, a former Hamilton *Spectator* reporter who now freelances. This training in her opinion offers the knowledge to report on other beats with better analysis. "I think it's important because the environment finds its way into a lot of different beats," says Oosthoek.

As Leahy continues to work towards the business model he is happy with, he is keeping in mind the future of environmental journalism.

In one of his October 2013 weekly email newsletter, Leahy mentioned young environmental journalists he knew being hopeful to get a career in independent environmental journalism. Within the last few years Leahy has seen more young people getting into the field, including his son.

"They know it's important," he says, "and it's worth doing."

Edit/layout by Olivia Rempel

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