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Citation

Barnett, Clive and Svendsen, Njord V. (2002). Making the environment news - reporting industrial pollution in Durban : the local is the global. *Rhodes Journalism Review*(21) pp. 54–55.

URL

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Making the environment news

Reporting industrial

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BY CLIVE BARNETT & NJORD V SVENDSEN

The current round of corporatisation and commercialisation of media organisations has put severe pressures on serious, critical and independent news journalism around the world. Coverage of complex issues has, in many contexts, declined due to increased pressures for cost efficiency. Environmental issues pose a severe challenge to established routines of news making, because they tend to involve long-term time frames, multi-faceted causal relations, and are characteristically associated with discourses of scientific expertise.

Our research on the news reporting of industrial pollution in the South Durban basin illustrates that serious journalism on environmental issues is certainly possible. Pollution has been a pressing concern for local communities in South Durban for decades. From the 1950s the area has been the site of simultaneous industrial development and forced relocation of African, Indian, and Coloured communities under the Group Areas Act. The residential areas of South Durban suffer very high levels of air, ground, and water pollution, not least because of their contiguity to two oil refineries and myriad petro-chemical industries. But sustained news coverage only really began in the early 1990s. This is all the more notable given a more general international trend for environmental news to decline in the 1990s. Of course, this upswing coincides with the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy in South Africa. But macro-level political change does not in itself explain this particular development. Our research indicates that the key to effective coverage of environmental issues is the quality of relationships between journalists and activists and NGOs.

BROWNING THE ENVIRONMENT

In South Africa since 1994, institutional changes and economic restructuring of the news media have significantly transformed journalists' source strategies. In particular, the value to journalists of social movement activists as sources has been enhanced. At the same time, new political opportunities mean that the need for media coverage among movements has been heightened. One of the most important contributions of new environmental NGOs in South Africa during the 1990s was to redefine the environment from a 'green' issue to a 'brown' issue. This involved a move away from a predominant 'green' conservationism to a people-oriented focus on the relationships between pollution and poverty. One of the main strategies for effecting this redefinition has been the deployment by activists of the vocabulary

of environmental rights and justice enshrined in the new South African Constitution.

FRAMING POLLUTION

During the 1990s, the number of stories about industrial pollution in general, and air pollution in particular, in Durban's mainstream commercial newspapers (such as *The Mercury*, *Daily News*, and *Sunday Tribune*) increased almost exponentially. In the late 80s, there were fewer than 10 stories on air pollution in a five-year period. Throughout the 1990s, there has been a steady increase in the number of stories, with nearly 60 stories on air pollution alone in 2000. The high point of South Durban environmental activism in terms of media coverage came in September 2000, with a week-long series of investigative news stories in Durban's leading daily paper, *The Mercury*. The "Poison in Our Air" series written by Tony Carnie and based on extensive investigative work, provided unprecedented coverage of local community concerns in mainstream media. Coverage in *The Mercury* was projected nation-wide and attracted follow-up stories in national broadcast media. The stories used a human-interest narrative that focused upon the unusually high incidence of cancer-related deaths in the South Durban area, particularly among children. This focus on children's health provides a universalising frame that enabled the plight of a specific set of poor black communities to be articulated with the concerns of a readership that is still predominantly white. This series also illustrates the fundamental shift in the pattern of sources represented in environmental news. Prior to 1995, official government and business voices dominate as cited sources in all coverage. But from 1995, the voices of individual residents, local community organisations, and NGOs emerge as equally legitimate sources.

The adoption of a storytelling narrative, focusing on individual life histories and hazards, is a means of reconciling the long-time frames of environmental change with the daily-ness of definitions of news. News coverage increasingly gives space and credence to a counter-discourse of local experience that contrasts with the 'objective', technical-bureaucratic discourse of business and government.

The enhanced legitimacy of local communities as sources is underlined by the emergence, epitomised by the "Poison in the Air" series, of a much more interpretative style of news reporting that compliments the adoption of storytelling forms of narrative. Environmental journalism in the early 1990s tended to be framed by a neutral, de-personalised narrative style, in which objectivity is established by the elision of the reporter's

authorial voice. Since the mid-1990s, the presence of the reporter's voice in stories becomes much more common, explicitly interpreting issues and events. The interpretative presence of the reporter's voice is an important means of mediating between the specific concerns and experiences of South Durban residents and a more general readership, much of which has little direct experience of living conditions in this part of the city.

By giving space to an alternative construction of pollution in the area, the articulation of ordinary experience with journalistic interpretation contextualises the discourse of science and expertise as just one perspective in a fundamentally contested public debate. *The Mercury's* reporting of South Durban is the outcome of the changing organisational dynamics of the Independent news group of which it is a part. These include the parent group's commitment to a business-led agenda of economic development; the commercial imperative to reposition newspapers in an effort to engage broader readerships and retain revenue; shifts in the norms of reporting towards human-interest stories; and a gradual transformation in the general ethos of journalism.

THE ACTIVISTS

The increase in news coverage of industrial pollution issues has been primarily enabled by the emergence of a single organisational 'voice', the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) in 1997, able to credibly represent the concerns of diverse communities in the area. Journalists involved in covering South Durban broadly divided into two camps in their attitude to community organisations and NGOs as sources. Those who have only occasionally covered the issue have tended to be somewhat sceptical of activist groups. On the other hand, journalists with the environment as their speciality beat have come to see local activists and community organisations as highly useful and credible sources. They are also much more inclined to accept advocacy journalism as a legitimate vocation.

The credibility of environmental activists and organisations as sources is an achievement of a varied communications and lobbying strategy undertaken by SDCEA, and associated NGOs such as groundWork and the Environmental Justice Network Forum. A key objective of these groups has been to establish legitimacy and credibility amongst journalists, in order to attract mainstream media attention, and thereby establish their public legitimacy in the eyes of government and business. As well as tried and trusted techniques such as holding public meetings in local communities to

pollution in Durban

mobilise support, SDCEA has also adopted highly innovative campaigning strategies.

For example, they have developed the "Toxic Tour". This is an excursion of the South Durban basin that takes in a series of key sites and sights of pollution, uncontrolled industrial development, hazardous chemical storage, habitat destruction, and much else. The Toxic Tour is a low cost but highly effective way of staging the problem of industrial pollution for local journalists, visiting activists, and academics, as part of a strategy of developing awareness and publicising the problems faced by local communities. The media-savvy of local environmental activists is also illustrated by the launching of a "Bucket Brigade" campaign in 2000, an idea borrowed from US environmental justice movements.

This is a simple strategy for empowering local people by providing them with a basic capacity to monitor industrial pollution. The launch of the Bucket Brigade in South Africa was made into a rolling news story, organised as a national event starting in Durban but moving on to pollution blackspots in other provinces. The aim was to publicise the inadequacy of both government and corporate monitoring of industrial pollution. The campaign attracted news coverage in both the print media and on national radio and television.

LEARNING FROM SOUTH DURBAN

The main objective of South Durban environmental activists has been to mobilise mainstream media attention as a means of acting upon national government ministries and major multi-national corporations. In this respect at least, they have actually been highly successful. The amount of coverage has certainly increased, and local residents and environmental organisations like SDCEA and groundWork have gained credibility and prominence as sources. In turn, journalists have begun to apply a broader repertoire of styles and approaches to their work, indicating an attempt to address a wider audience about the significance of environmental rights. In news coverage since 2000, it has become routine for government and corporate initiatives on environmental issues to be ascribed to the sustained mobilisation by communities and activist organisations. Furthermore, it is clear that media coverage has significantly altered the dimensions of public debate about environmental policy not just in South Durban, but at a national level too. For example, in early 2001 the Independent's national business paper *Business Report* established an environmental news beat, based in Durban. This illustrates the extent to which the potential environmental and social impacts

of industrial and urban growth have become issues that business investment decision-making can no longer ignore. The example of South Durban is therefore indicative of the extent to which a culture of public accountability around environmental issues has begun to open up through the articulation of local and national activism with mainstream environmental journalism.

We do not want to idealise this particular example, nor under estimate the continuing pressures facing journalists in South Africa and elsewhere in covering contentious issues. There are four themes that emerge from this case study that we want to underscore in conclusion.

1. Media transformation in South Africa since 1994 has transformed the norms of news making and newsworthiness. New technologies like email have changed the speed, frequency, and range of distribution that political actors can attain in accessing news organisations. Initiatives to promote 'developmental journalism' in training and education have also enhanced the importance of environmental issues.
2. The practical realisation of the democratic potential of news media depends on the

ways in which activists, social movements, and NGOs engage with the changed imperatives driving news journalism in post-apartheid South Africa.

3. This leads on to the observation of the importance of locally embedded activist organisations being able to network internationally, in order to access various resources, including technical assistance and discursive framing strategies.
4. A point of caution: one of the key reasons why this story has become a focus of extensive news attention is because of the importance of the South Durban industrial region as a hub of national economic growth. This same degree of national significance does not attach itself quite so easily to all contentious issues. This underscores the point that the democratic role of the news media is not merely a matter of journalistic practice. It depends more broadly upon the capacities of progressive political actors to articulate the scales of everyday life with the scales at which effective political power is exercised, by adopting discourses and strategies that demand the attention of news media organisations.

Tony Carnie, author of the "Poison in our air" series, took this picture of South Durban air pollution.

