

# Alison Anderson: Media, Culture and the Environment

Routledge, New York 1997, 236 pages

The life-threatening characteristic or the devastating consequence of environmental crime - the destruction of human and other beings' vital natural environment - are becoming increasingly exposed in the media and the society in general. We live in an era of information technology. Every media-news needs only a few seconds to circle around the world. Almost nothing can remain hidden from the curious media. Thus, the individual acts of pollution and environmental degradation are very often a subject of media coverage. If this includes the destruction of the great and important habitats or endangered human lives, it can also be a front page story.

As in the past decades environment has become an important subject of international debate, Anderson notes that at various points in this period different environmental disasters and issues have come to the fore of public and political attention. For the author, the study of the environment deserves to occupy a central place within the media and cultural studies, especially because the news media play a crucial role in framing this contested terrain. Nowadays, media dedicate serious attention to various environmental issues, such as global warming and green house gasses, depletion of the ozone layer, waste disposal, air pollution and acid rain, nuclear issues, oil spills, conservation and animal welfare issues, rainforests, food production and genetically modified food, population growth and starvation and unequal distribution of natural resources. News media are the main and the biggest source of information for the public; therefore it does make a difference, what and how the media report.

The book *Media, Culture and the Environment* is a book about the media reporting about environmental issues; their sources, methods, causes and consequences. The book is divided into seven chapters and thematically covers six very different but connected topics: politics and news media, news production, environmental lobby, social construction of the environment, news sources and mediating the environment. It is possible to conclude that the author analyses the media production about environmental issues through all phases from the broad sociological perspective. The author is especially focused on the characteristics of the process of news media reporting and the consequences of the news media reporting about environmental issues.

Anderson stresses, that environmental reporting raises important questions about the relationship of journalists to their news sources (e.g. government and politicians, industry, scientists, NGOs and environmental groups). For her, news production is usually the outcome not merely of ownership and possible control of media, or of journalistic routines and work rituals. Furthermore, news production depends on the relationship between the news media, news sources and their

institutional arena. Official sources, as government departments and industrial magnates, enjoy privileged access to the news media and therefore, face little or no difficulties in attracting sustained media attention. Exactly the opposite is true about the environmental NGOs, which have to overcome many obstacles to even get media attention. Furthermore, Anderson notes that despite little general knowledge about it, news sources, such as NGOs, politicians, academics etc. play a crucial role in the news-making process.

Environmental issues represent events where it is difficult to come to a consensus about the occurrence of particular events and causes and effects of it. According to Anderson, environmental issues are often very complex and fiercely contested by different subjects and their interests. Due to the nature of scientific enquiry, evidence about environmental degradation often remains inconclusive for a long period of time. All mentioned complexities of environmental issues require journalists to transform technical jargon into laypersons language to avoid unnecessary mistakes and misinterpretations. Since news production is based on journalists' judgments and aims to prepare a newsworthy story, Anderson stresses that news media often present only a partial version of reality. Differences in market orientation within news media exist and environmental issues are one of the topics, (often) used for achieving one's own interests. The author states that popular, midmarket and quality newspapers have their market niches, within which exist their own 'modes of address' of maintaining dialogue with the readers. Also, reporting about environmental issues reflects the general identity of the newspaper and sometimes even its political orientation. Although media owners will deny it, Anderson's survey has shown that judgments inevitably play an important part in shaping the news. She suggests that the news produced by the media is a complex array of social, organizational and cultural processes. In her opinion, the news making media present people with specific versions of selective reality. Due to this fact, when considering the media representation of occurring environmental issues, the society must avoid the glossing over the real independent properties of nature.

Environmental reporting contains an underlying moral structure, where sometimes the category 'environment' is represented similar as crime news, when focus of the media is turned to violent confrontation. In such cases the terms 'environment', 'risk' or 'nature' may be categorized in seemingly more neutral ways. Deriving from the above-mentioned emphasis, Anderson enumerates three important characteristics of environmental issues, which influence their chances of becoming news items: 1) environmental coverage is event-centred and news media are often preoccupied with dramatic events (e.g. oil spills, chemical leaking, etc.) which shock readers and increase publicity; 2) environmental coverage is characterized by a strong visual component, although differences between television and press exist and television news make greater use of this criteria than press. Furthermore, availability and quality of a picture can become a specific problem during the coverage of some environmental issues, such as global warming and green house gasses, which are hard to see; and 3) news production is often closely tied to a 24-hours daily cycle, while environmental issues usually involve longer processes (documentary films represent a better solution than television news for

the presentation of complicated environmental issues), which often involve slow, drown-out processes.

During this news making process social reality is constructed, therefore it is not indifferent, considering how much exaggeration and unreal reporting is used. Especially nowadays more and more sensitive topics of environmental issues are published in the media. Therefore, in the worst case scenario of major public panic, fears and riots could occur. When dealing with environmental issues, news media are highly selective in the representation of environmental issues and environmental risk. Rare environmental risks, connected to unexpected, dramatic disasters, such as chemical spills and explosions, are usually over-represented, because they present highly dramatic news for 'blood thirsty' crowds.

In the last decades environmental issues have provoked intense public concern and political debate. Media are not monolithic. They form a complex and differentiated system governed by particular organizational and societal constraints. Media reporting of risk and the environment are influenced by social, political and cultural factors. Anderson is clear that in the media environment competes for attention with a range of other issues, such as deviance, race, gender etc.

The present book represents the turning point in the field of media reporting about environmental issues, especially environmental criminality, as well as the book of Melissa Jarrell *Environmental Crime and The Media: News Coverage of Petroleum Refining Industry Violations*, which was published ten years later and does not offer so crucial pieces of information and knowledge about media work and the way of reporting about environmental issues. Jarrell has narrowly focused only on corporate environmental crime. Furthermore, this knowledge about media reporting is very important and useful in the field of green criminology in Slovenia and other countries, where the work of the media in this field has not been studied and analysed yet. The review of the Slovene Co-operative Online Bibliographic System and Services did not give any results concerning the survey of media coverage on environmental criminality in Slovenia. Therefore, further comparison with the situation in the United States of America is not possible until a criminological or a sociological survey in this field of environmental criminality is performed and results published. Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude that environmental criminality is a normally discussed topic in the Slovene media, like all other forms of crime. Furthermore, it is impossible to say, if criminologists are considering the environmental crime reports facing the same problems as in other fields of media reporting about crime, such as: use of the most notorious criminal offences and other accidents to attract readers (so-called bloody press); selective representation of crime reality; exaggeration in crime reporting, which sometimes offers very unbelievable accounts of crimes, offenders and even victims, etc. To result summarize, criminological and sociological studies are needed.

The second crucial and unique cognition in Anderson's book is the comparison between scientists and media reporting of environmental issues (Anderson, 1997: 168): *The problem is that there is a fundamental conflict between the tendency for scientists to qualify everything and the media dependence upon short, sharp events and clear unqualified statements. Scientists tend to have little training in media relations and they are*

*therefore often suspicious of journalists. Scientists need to develop a greater awareness of the workings of the media and similarly journalists need to cultivate a greater understanding of the constraints that influence scientists. Finally, environmentalists should avoid the temptation to manipulate the popular press through offering newsworthy explanations for complex phenomena because, in the long term, this may prove counter-productive.*

The third, very important fact in the present book is the conclusion that the ill-prepared reporter will have a difficulty in distinguishing between acceptable environmental change and environmental damage or in attempting to evaluate the rupture of life support chains or to recognize incipient health hazards. These issues require more than a superficial approach of the deadline-weary reporter. They require reportorial and editorial insight into the environment and natural sciences, especially ecology and biology. Unfortunately, it often happens that journalists, who are not specifically trained in this area, report about environmental criminality; therefore the incorrect use of the basic terms as well as an (unintentional) misleading of the public and creation of panic occurs. Deliberate exaggeration in order to increase sales is certainly a separate issue. Also, reporting on environmental disasters, such as leakage of toxic substances from storage tanks in factories, releases of toxic gases due to 'error' at a plant's chimneys rack, the discovery of drums of hazardous acids in karst caves, etc. often become 'hot news' featured on the front page.

The book about media, culture and environment is intended for academics and researchers in the field of media reporting and environmental issues. Furthermore, it can be a very useful guideline for the 'new and green' reporter in the field of environmental issues, as well as a very good handbook for a green criminologist or a researcher that often deals with press and media reporting. Both, the reporter and the researcher can read what is right and what wrong, and how to make a news media reporting and avoid undesired consequences in the public. Nowadays, the media are insufficiently aware of their role and impact on public, on its understanding of environmental crime and the awareness of the dangers of it. In drawing the attention to the violations of the environmental protection legislation the media have a dual role. The media can with their research journalists search out and discover different forms of environmental crime of the rich and powerful. Furthermore, the media can with the increase of real and verified news (which certainly has to do with journalistic ethics) draw the peoples' attention and raise their awareness about the importance of preserving undamaged nature.

*Katja Eman*