

A Logic Model Analysis of the
Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting

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Environmental Education 5165
Fall Term 2004

HOW should journalists reconcile their need to construct interesting angles for their environmental news stories with scientists' instinct to keep research methodical, low-key and as unadorned as possible?

The Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting is a not-for-profit organization based in Narragansett, Rhode Island that hopes to help environmental journalists and marine scientists meet half-way. In short, it is an organization that offers environmental education for members of the media.

The organization was named in honor of Michael P. Metcalf, the late publisher of the Providence Journal who was known for his keen interest in marine and environmental issues. He was also known for his integrity, vision, and high standards for writing

Priorities and Programs

The institute has three priorities: 1) to promote clear and accurate reporting of scientific news and environmental issues, 2) to strengthen understanding between the scientific community

and the news media, and 3) to provide opportunities for beginning journalists to learn and improve their skills in marine and environmental reporting.¹

Inputs

The institute's website does not specifically state if the organization was formed in response to a documented deterioration of reportage on the environment. An e-mail sent to the executive director about this question has been unanswered. But it is safe to assume that the formation of the institute was because of a perceived inaccuracy in the coverage of marine environment issues.

Four organizations donated money to help create the institute and fund its projects. These are the Telaka Foundation and the foundations of three news organizations: the Providence Journal Foundation, the A.H. Belo Corp. (parent company of the Providence Journal), and the Philip Graham Fund of the Washington Post. These grants also help employ the institute's staff. The University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography houses the Metcalf Institute and lends its facilities for program activities.

Outputs

Led by Executive Director Jackleen De la Harpe, the institute administers the following programs and activities to meet its objectives:

- Annual Workshop for Journalists - a one-week immersion workshop that provides 12-14 journalists with basic scientific training in the field and laboratory.
- Scientists and Journalists: Getting the Point Across - an annual lecture series for the public, scientists, and journalists about environmental and scientific news and journalism.
- Environmental Reporting Fellowships (42 weeks) - for minority reporters to study marine science and put that knowledge to use at a daily newspaper or NPR-member radio station.

¹ (2004) The Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting. Retrieved November 11, 2004 from <http://www.gso.uri.edu/metcalf/>

- Science Seminar for Editors - for editors to gain a better awareness about the science underlying some of the complex environmental issues facing New England.
- Climate Scientist and Environmental Journalist Workshops - provide opportunities for scientists and media to better understand the impediments to communicating news about climate change.
- Environment Writer - an online newsletter published 10 times each year that provides background information for journalists who report on environment.
- Journalism Backgrounder Series - short fact sheets that generally address marine biodiversity.

In its work, the institute reaches print journalists, radio journalists, TV journalists, their editors, journalism students, journalism educators, journalism schools and colleges from all over the United States and some foreign countries. It also draws participation from marine scientists and researchers.

Outcomes and Impacts

Metcalf Institute's short term outcomes would be the following:

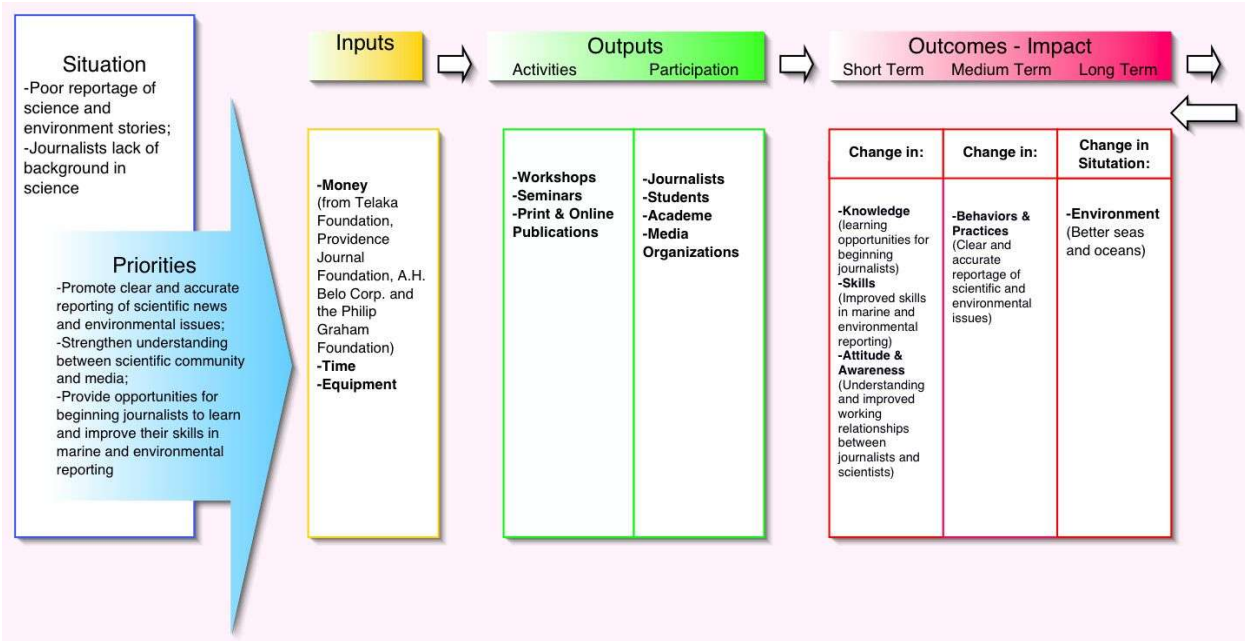
- A change in journalists' knowledge of marine biodiversity issues and scientific research;
- A change in journalists' skills in interpreting scientific research and in their use of these when writing or reporting these stories; and
- A change in attitude and awareness among journalists and scientists. The institute hopes that by providing a venue for both groups to dialogue, then their working relationships will improve.

Its medium term outcome or impact would be a change in behaviors and practices: a clearer and more accurate reportage of scientific and environmental issues.

Finally, the institute's long term outcome or impact is a change in the environment, more specifically, better seas and oceans. Figure 1 illustrates the previously mentioned inputs, outputs

and outcomes using the Logic Model method.

Figure 1



Assumptions and External Factors

The Metcalf Institute seems to operate under the assumption that articles that are better written and more accurate will automatically see print or be broadcast through radio and TV. By its focus and choice of activities, it also assumes that a textual report (as in the case of print media) is the best form of news delivery for media consumers in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world.

What it fails to consider are external factors which influence the publication of a story or the broadcasting of a particular bit of news.

These are:

1. News is often bad news. The worse it is, the more it will bump other milder stories off the newspaper's line up or a TV or radio news program's headlines.
2. News always has to be fresh. A bumped off story is stale news the next day. That is, unless it develops into a bigger story.

3. The day's news will determine which stories make it to the printing press or the broadcast. Environmental and science features have more chances of making it into a news line up during weekends when most government agencies and commercial offices are closed.
4. Editors choose stories. Reporters have no say in the publication or the “killing” of their stories.
5. Advertisements determine the number of stories that an editor can include in a newspaper edition or during a broadcast. Sometimes stories are bumped off simply because there is no more space or broadcast time has run out.
6. Commercial pressures force news editors to highlight news items that will "sell".

One other important external factor that the institute did not consider is that today's media consumers have visual tastes. There is a movement towards more pictures and more “graphic illustrations” . There is also lesser room for text. Television news also has a greater appeal to a majority of media consumers than newspapers and radio broadcasts.

Journalists and scientists may eventually end up understanding each other better. But will they effectively deliver their message to today's information consumers?

Evaluation

The Metcalf Institute has straightforward objectives: to promote accuracy in environmental reportage, to help journalists and scientists work better together and to provide training for cub reporters who want to specialize in reporting on the environment. At present, there is no way to tell if they are doing well because their website does not offer any information about how the organization evaluates its work. But there are larger things to consider. The sphere that the institute operates in also involves editors, advertisers, commercial pressures and most importantly an audience with changing tastes and evolving ways of processing information. The institute will do more effective and influential work if it considers these factors more carefully and revise their programs accordingly.

Recommendations

My first recommendation will be for the Metcalf Institute to conduct a study or research on the best ways to present accurate environmental news, information and issues to the public through media.

In his report “A Plan for Improved Environmental Literacy”, Kevin J. Coyle (2004)² recognizes media as “America's most powerful environmental information source”. He also notes that “current formats for presenting environmental news provide little background on what causes the problems or its underlying science”.

“News coverage in particular contains a steady stream of isolated facts and abbreviated messages that penetrate the public's mind but are without context,” Coyle writes. (p. 114)

This is where the Metcalf Institute fits in the scheme of things. Its work is precisely to help journalists understand the underlying science behind marine stories as well as encourage reporters to present these facts in the best possible way. But it needs to understand how news readers, listeners and viewers understand information. Coyle also recognizes this in his report. He stressed the need to create an understanding of who these people are and how they absorb information.”

My second recommendation is to have journalists train scientists too. Perhaps scientists can shadow a journalist for two weeks and meet two deadlines every working day and have meetings with editors so they can have a deeper understanding of how media works. In relation to this, it might also be useful for scientists, especially those who work closely with the institute, to receive some training in environmental education.

After going through details on Metcalf Institute's workshops, I noticed that the scientists' teaching methods were limited to the lecture, question and answer sessions and bringing journalists outdoors to teach them some field research techniques. I wonder how effective these scientists are in teaching non-scientists.

² Coyle, K. (2004) A Plan for Improved Environmental Literacy. In Understanding Environmental Literacy (pp. 102-115) Washington, DC: National Environmental and Training Foundation.

Coyle covers this in his report. He says of environmental scientists and specialists : “We often assume that because they have high levels of knowledge they can automatically communicate environmental content to the public.” (p. 110)

Coyle recommends providing “environmental and natural resource staff experts of agencies with basic continuing education on how to communicate with and educate the public on agency science and policy issues”. (p. 110)

My third recommendation would be for Metcalf to hold workshops for news media's graphic illustrators and artists. These are the people who use images and computer graphics to create a representation of a news story or a running story. Excellent examples of these can be seen in Time Magazine and Newsweek Magazine. These are also present in most newspapers.

Coyle also recommends more use of “news graphics such as maps, schematics and diagrams” instead of lengthy feature articles. He notes that “people, as a rule, have poor geographic knowledge and do not grasp many cause-and-effect relationships regarding the environment—pollution, flooding, fires, sprawl and so on. Consistent use of maps and diagrams would help.”

Fourth, I would recommend that Metcalf encourage newspapers to publish more excellent environment and science stories by launching an annual award for news coverage, feature stories, photographs, documentaries and news graphics. They can also opt to link with a more established journalism awards body, like the Pulitzer Prize, by donating prize money for new awards categories. The Pulitzer Prize currently has a category for Best Explanatory Reporting. The organization describes this as “a distinguished example of explanatory reporting that illuminates a significant and complex subject, demonstrating mastery of the subject, lucid writing and clear presentation”.³

This category has honored several environmental journalists and their work. However, it is a category that also embraces other topics, such as economics, politics and education. It would

3 (2004) The Pulitzer Prize. Retrieved November 17, 2004 from <http://www.pulitzer.org>

not ensure a consistent improvement of journalism standards for environmental issues. It would then be beneficial to have a category that solely focuses on this.

In his journal publication “Toward a Coherent Theory of Environmentally Significant Behavior”, Paul C. Stern (2004) suggested that programs that employ a combination of intervention types have shown the most effective changes in environmentally significant behavior.⁴ In an earlier article, Stern (1999) also mentioned that the interventions of incentives and information interact quite well to produce desirable behavior changes.

Perhaps increasing incentives (awards, prestige) for media companies to publish or broadcast excellent reportage on the environment could work for the Metcalf Institute. These incentives, combined with better information about media consumers, better ways of presenting stories to them, and better ways for journalists to understand the science could help the institute lead the way in making media work for the planet's and for everyone's well-being.

Figure 2 in the next page illustrates the complete analysis using the Logic Model.

Figure 2

⁴ Stern, P. (2000) Toward a Coherent Theory of Environmentally Significant Behavior. Journal of Social Sciences, 56 (3), 404-424.

