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What “News”? What’s New? (Keep Your Eye on the Ball)

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There Is No Such Thing as "Immaculate Perception:"

We live in a conflicted moment. Major conflicts exist over questions of public policy and the ways in which we are expected or directed to live our lives as individuals or as participants in communities, corporations, nation states or citizens of the world.

We all realize this. This is not news. Conflict is a normal part of the social package. We have come to expect it; we need to accept it. At the very least we must learn to work with this social fact.

Nevertheless, as the world's leading scientists have been reminding us, we need now to move beyond this state of affairs. As they point out, if we expect to survive as a species in the complex and delicate ecosystem where we live our task now is to move beyond conflict to consensus, beyond petty divisiveness to the common purpose of human survival.

Working toward this kind of common and coordinated unity may be a goal, but stating that goal is not the same as achieving it. The problem is just not that simple.

The reason is that conflict is built-in to the way we know about the world in the first place. In effect, there is no such thing as "immaculate perception." That is to say, none of us can conceive the world we live in except through a lens of personal perception. Where do we derive this "lens of personal perception?" Where does it come from?

In practice this is a complex and many-layered phenomenon. The key point, however, is that in addition to personal preferences and biases that

influence our perception, there are a whole series of other filters that operate on a social basis throughout any given culture to influence what we perceive. In short, none of us are blessed with the capacity for immaculate perception. We need, in fact, to be constantly aware of the limitations of our own perception and try to overcome them.

What "News?"

In addition, the problem of figuring out what is going on in our world is now made considerably more complicated by the changes taking place in the news media. Over the last decade, the structure



and composition of the "news industry" in America has undergone a radical reorganization. Papers

have been going out of business, large entertainment conglomerates have bought up news outlets and the Internet has radically changed the capacities for mass communication. In this regard, we need to ask ourselves, even if we struggle to keep informed, "What 'news' is now left to view, absorb, or consider?" Who owns the entertainment outlets and media vehicles that convey the so called "news?" Is the public being well served by an



entertainment driven media that seems more interested in selling the news than it telling it? These are the kinds of questions that are regularly reported upon in Democracy Now and National Public Radio programs from time to time (see for, example, ["Rocky Mountain News Ceases Publication as Other Newspapers Face Threat of Similar Fate,"](#) Democracy Now, (6 March 2009) and ["Local News, Without Paper,"](#) NPR - WBUR - On Point, (19 March 2009 11:00 AM EST).

In a time of radical reorganization and general constraint in all existing news media the problem of receiving adequate environmental reporting has become quite acute. What is "adequate?" Well determining this is part of the problem. If the news



media becomes entirely driven by consumer demand for its "product" then the problem is that so called "bad news" about the environment may never be reported simply because there is relatively little

market for it. There is a considerable danger in this respect of the public hearing only what it wants to hear and not necessarily what it should be hearing to function effectively -- not just as consumers but as responsible citizens of the nation-state and the larger world. One media watch-dog program called "On the Media" has examined how the pressures of commercial news production have systematically distorted the kinds of media coverage in what they call "the environmental beat" (see: "The Cost of Being Green," NPR - On The Media, 13 February 2009).

The report mentions that in an apparent cost-cutting move CNN radically reduced its regular environmental coverage team just at the time when the need for more extensive and in-depth coverage is becoming more and more apparent on subtle science and policy issues like global climate change. Interviewing Eric Pooley, the report discusses the way in which the United States press has covered the different economic aspects of climate change policy (see: Eric Pooley, ["How Much Would You Pay to Save the Planet? The American Press and the Economics of Climate Change,"](#) Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Discussion Paper, D-49, January 2009).

The question: "What news?" is, then, a crucial one. When it comes to considering environmental matters as we continue to witness a total transformation of the traditional forms of journalism, we need to ask ourselves about how the choices are being made to report on environmental matters.

A dramatic illustration of the striking contrast between different news sources is provided by how the different news media recently covered the events surrounding PowerShift09 in Washington, D.C. in early March. CNN produced a report that interviewed two of the group's organizers (see: ["Power Shift '09 on CNN National,"](#) YouTube - energyaction, 17 March 2009). Meanwhile the Fox News story on the same subject belittled the question of climate change as a "hoax" -- in much the same tone as Senator James Inhofe has over the years. One commentator referred to the demonstration that was held in Washington as a "stupid protest," and framed the issue of global warming as if there was a great deal of controversy surrounding the science climate change. He went on to suggest that the forthcoming conference of the [Heartland Institute](#) to be held in New York city proved that there was serious scientific dispute about climate, while at the same time he seemed to be unaware of the thousands of scientists meeting in Copenhagen who were submitting evidence to the IPCC of accelerated climate change (see, ["Fox](#)

[News: Split-Opinions On Global Warming.](#) YouTube, 8 March 2009; Dan Gainor, ["Rain or Shine, Environmentalists Want to Control Us."](#) The Fox Forum, 11 March 2009 13:00 EST; David Schukman, ["Scientists on new climate data,"](#) BBC News Online, 10 March 2009 14:23 GMT, Tuesday; and University of Copenhagen, ["Key Messages from the Congress."](#) International Scientific Congress Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges & Decisions, (Copenhagen, Denmark, 12 March 2009).



It may well have been a general sense of despair about the fairness or accuracy of the treatment that they could expect from America's mainstream media that motivated the PowerShift09 organizers to present their own reporting from the conference through developing an address within YouTube (see: ["This is PowerShift,"](#) YouTube - energyaction, 28 February 2009; and the conference material presented at: [PowerShift09 - energyaction](#) video coverage and [Capitol Climate Action](#)). In addition to overview summaries, their web-based coverage included extended speeches by keynote speakers (see: ["Van Jones | Powershift '09,"](#) YouTube - energyaction, 1 March 2009).

What's New?

Amidst all of the struggle for objectivity and fairness in the press and the constant effort that is needed to discern who is deliberately spinning the data, we need to keep our eye on the ball -- the big one -- the entire globe. In this respect we need to keep asking: "what is it that is genuinely new about what the scientists are learning about Earth's dynamics -- whether or not it ends up being reported in the popular "news" media?"

In this task scientists like James Hansen deserve our extended attention (see: Dr. James Hansen, ["A Call to Action on Global Warming from Dr. James Hansen,"](#) YouTube - greenpeaceusa, 18 February 2009). Hansen has kept calling for the public to examine what is genuinely new about the new climate world we are now facing as a human

community. The scientists that gathered in Copenhagen were similarly focused on the genuinely new data that has been collected and correlated since June 2006 -- the cut-off date for publications considered by the IPCC for the completion of their 4th Assessment Reports.

The genuinely new information from the Copenhagen meetings was not encouraging. (see: David Schukman, ["Scientists on new climate data,"](#) BBC News Online, 10 March 2009 14:23 GMT, Tuesday; and University of Copenhagen, ["Key Messages from the Congress."](#) International Scientific Congress Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges & Decisions, Copenhagen, Denmark, 12 March 2009; David Shukman, ["Sea levels to surge at least a metre by 2100,"](#) YouTube, 11 March 2009; and Associated Press, ["Scientists present latest news on climate change,"](#) The International Herald Tribune - AP, 9 March 2009).



This, then, is what's really new. And these sobering findings should become "news" as well. So far, this has not happened. The public may need to take a more active role to demand of the news media that it start to report on the genuinely new scientific data rather than become fixated upon the petty disputes between climate change "enthusiasts" and "denialists." Simulations like those that have been done to simulate sea level rise for the east coast cities of the United States, ought now to become more publicly available for serious public debate. (See: ["Global Warming Causes Rising Sea-Levels and Boston Flooding,"](#) YouTube - natlenvirotrust, 5 December 2006).

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