

Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development

Volume 9
Issue 2 *Volume 9, Spring 1994, Issue 2*

Article 12

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Viki Reath

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THE MEDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

VIKI REATH*

I want to thank St. John's Law School for inviting me and for recognizing that the media will have an impact on the environmental justice movement. I think it is true that there is a sense of reality that comes through the television, newspapers, and magazines. I think that a lot of the things that I hear about how the media are covering this issue really boil down to two things; There really is not much coverage of it in the main media, and the coverage usually is from a sensational standpoint, usually when there is a Superfund problem. Often, it makes the government officials or the business community look bad.

To change that approach, it is important to understand that newspapers and television are there to have people watch them. People who want to get their stories need to understand what these stories are. I would submit that, if given the choice of watching the first panel which included wonderful intellectual approaches and were very interesting to listen to—I would agree that you did not need coffee to keep you awake—or turning the dial to Hazel Johnson,¹ I think you would stop at Hazel Johnson. Hers is a personal story. With that as a little introduction, here are some of the things I think reporters and editors would think were environmental justice stories.

One caveat: any kind of pitches to cover the story for any kind of ideological reasons—because it is an important moral issue, or because it is a Civil Rights issue, or a fairness issue, per se—are not going to convince an editor or a reporter that it is newsworthy. It is better to be more concrete and to go to specific things. Here are some thoughts about how I would have covered the first panel.

I would also appeal for a little bit of understanding of the restraints reporters face. How could a reporter listen to that first panel, and then rush back and write a story on a deadline? What

* Reporter, *Environment Week*, Washington D.C., covering environmental justice, Superfund and other national issues; B.A., University of Pennsylvania.

¹ See Hazel Johnson, *A Personal Story*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 513 (1994).

would the story be? A reporter would have trouble figuring it all out. But making a few notes, since I have done this for a few years, I would say that, from what Robert Bullard said, what was news today was his discussing how one would go about analyzing the studies of environmental justice and showing there are different ways of looking at neighborhoods.² For example, ZIP codes produce one sort of result and census tracts produce another. If Dr. Bullard were to approach a newspaper reporter, instead of saying, "I gave a speech today and I said all these wonderful things," he could say that he offered an analysis of how the studies should be interpreted. That might motivate me to say, "I would like to write about that speech today."

I have two things to say about what Michael Greve said.³ First, his statement that any movement that cannot put its mission on a bumper sticker faces a real obstacle sums up a lot of the problems with the press. The reason is that a reporter has to tell an editor in two minutes what the story line is. And if you have any kind of complexity that you have to think out, the editor will probably say, "well, write a few paragraphs and we will put it in the back of the paper." Editors do not have much time.

With that in mind, the things which Mr. Greve said that I would go back and write about would be that environmental justice systematically involves real problems, but that the solutions might bring harm. I would want to know what he meant by that, and what the other side had to say about that. But that would be a good story that could be written after the speech that he gave today.

I also want to follow up on Richard Lazarus's mention of the Department of Justice lawsuit that was filed concerning municipal water.⁴ Any kind of lawsuit that is filed—not just saying you are going to file a lawsuit—usually is a reason for a story, especially if it involves a big company or even a big local company, or if it involves any kind of government entity.

² See Dr. Robert D. Bullard, *The Legacy of American Apartheid and Environmental Racism*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 445 (1994).

³ See Dr. Michael S. Greve, *Environmental Justice or Political Opportunism?*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 475 (1994).

⁴ See Richard J. Lazarus, *Distribution in Environmental Justice: Is There a Middle Ground?*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 481 (1994).

I think it was Mr. Taibi who said something about environmental laws interrelated with securities law.⁵ I did not quite get it all, but I would go back to him and say, "What exactly are you talking about there, because that sounds like an interesting angle?" It is concrete; and it would be something unusual.

Mr. Samp explored the argument that fundamental societal changes are really the hidden agenda of this movement.⁶ I think this is a wonderful topic, and would ask him to back up his thesis. That could be another story.

Overall, the environmental justice saga is an excellent opportunity to write about local issues as they affect federal policy and vice versa. It is a good opportunity for newspapers to act as watchdogs, to follow up on what business is saying, and to follow up on what the government and the grassroots people are saying. Are they really backing up what they are saying with their actions?

I cover environmental justice because it became of interest to a lot of our business readers, and that is the way I have been able to convince my editor that it is an important story. It is definitely a business story. I think most editors want to write about business, so I think that is the way to present it: How it has affected business and how it will cost money here and there, and maybe even eventually cost consumers money. A consumer story is always worth writing.

⁵ See Anthony D. Taibi, *Environmental Justice, Structural Economic Theory, and Community Economic Empowerment*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 491 (1994).

⁶ See Richard A. Samp, *Fairness For Sale in the Marketplace*, 9 ST. JOHN'S J. LEGAL COMMENT. 503 (1994).

