Ashley Interview

Environment Reporter

TG: When you look back at these 10 years of covering climate change, overall, do think it's changed in a significant way?

A: I think I'm of two minds about that. First of all, I'll speak personally about covering, and then really talk more broadly. So there was a point at [outlet redacted] when I was working there where we made the editorial decision that we were no longer going to interview climate change deniers. Where we, the thinking early on about covering climate change was you interviewed the scientist that says "the sky is falling" and you interviewed the scientist that says "it's not human beings' fault and we're not associated with or connected to the changing global climate." And there was a point where a very clear editorial decision was made that we were no longer going to put those people, climate change deniers, on the air, and I stand by that decision to this day. I think the consensus of the scientific community is clear and it's really unfortunate that the media has not caught onto that consensus as quickly or as broadly as [I would prefer]. So that's kind of the big picture I think, in terms of covering climate change.

For me personally, I don't personally interview climate change deniers and it was just last week that, you know, there was some, the…state senate had a climate change denying scientist on the floor. They were talking about farming legislation, and my boss said, you know, you need to cover that. I said, "no, I'm not putting that man on the radio. Sorry." And I don't know if he sneaked into the media, or if got some coverage. But I don't think this is a partisan issue. I think this is just good journalistic integrity and making the decision that the body of the scientific literature is saying one thing, and that does not mean that you interview somebody who's saying something else unless they've got some really good facts to back it up. And it's clear from the scientific community that most of them don't, and if they are saying anything, they're probably getting money from a fossil fuel industry or interest.

I think, you know, I can't speak for my peers. I think the hardest thing in covering climate change is that it's all bad news. It's really, really hard to find stories that people want to read and people want to listen to. Because frankly, I mean myself included, it's really hard at the end of the day to go home and pick up an article that's about how the sea level rise is going to mean that buying homes on the coast, or you know, people that live in lowlands in New Orleans are going to be homeless soon. I mean, nobody wants to read that stuff in their spare time. And so the journalist, you're always looking for the story that people want to read or want to listen to. [With] climate change stories, I think it's the biggest challenge, because the enemy is so nebulous and the impacts are so broad and varied, that it's really hard to tell stories without I think giving the public a really unhealthy degree of apathy about the whole thing.

T: Can you give me a sense of the discussions, was it a controversial decision to decide to follow the consensus of the scientific community?

It wasn't a hard conversation at all. I mean it came down in sort of like, Mr. X , the executive producer of X, was the one who put forward the decision, and we were, I mean my memory of it, and granted, it was five years ago now, everyone was in agreement. There wasn't anybody who felt strongly otherwise.

I think the interesting thing that's happening on that front is the more and more talk [you hear] about climate adaptation, and so people are happy to say, to move forward with dealing with the impacts without ever really talking about the problem itself. And so that's another way I think that climate change deniers, or at least responsible parties, are getting away without really having to be a part of the conversation, or at the table about this stuff. Because they are, you know, we're talking about how we fix the problem, not who's fault it is at this point. And think that's a real missing link in ongoing coverage about this stuff.

T: Can you talk about a story that broke through the worry about the negativity of climate change? Is there a hook that you've been able to find in recent years?

Um, I wish that I could say that I do, and that I have. I don't think this is a good news story. So I think it would be lying to the pubic to do a story that's uplifting about climate change. So I can't say that I have. I think that recently, this American Life, you probably heard the show they did exclusively on climate change -- It's Not in My Backyard. And I think they did a great job in their reporting, by talking to people that don't believe that human beings are contributing to climate change and really engaging the other side of that conversation to make it more listenable. Because people want to watch things like Dr. Phil, right? Because you watch the controversy. People are drawn to controversy. And that's one way to at least make entertaining coverage of a really hard issue is by talking to the, quote, other side, or people who don't believe this is happening. I think they did that in a way that still advances the coverage of the issue and the need for action on it. But I would say that personally what I try to do in my coverage of climate change on the regional level, because I work for XX as part of, have you ever heard of XX? So it's a regional, it's funded by XX and it's a regional multimedia reporting project based in XXX. And I'm the XXX office of that partnership, and we are doing a regional project on climate change right now actually that we're just launching. But I think that the goal is really to show people what their connection is to climate change...

So I guess the last story I did that really kind of took climate change on, or head on, was landslides in XX. We've had a really, projections for climate change in the XX are very different from elsewhere in the country. We're supposed to get heavier rains and in more intense bouts of storm events, instead of the kind of steady…drizzle that people think of in XX. And that presents some very real problems because scientists know just how much precipitation triggers landslides in XX. And these slides kill people, they knock out trains, rail service along major, major industrial corridors in this region, along the coasts particularly. And so I did a story that basically was, you know, the stupid TV journalists in the region, sorry, they're good people but they do the kind of like "look at this landslide! Look at the track that's out! People aren't going to be able to ride the commuter rail between XX and XX for two days because of this!" I didn't do that story, but I did do the story that said "this is one of the worst years on record for landslides in this state, and climate scientists project that with heavier rainfalls we will see more problems with infrastructure related to climate change. Here's somebody from [the] State Department of Transportation to talk about it; here's somebody from the climate impacts group at the University…" I think a key for that story was finding out, finding a very real impact that people can feel or see close to home. Because with so many of these things it's like "I live in the mountains. Sea level rise doesn't matter to me. Or, you know, the warming temperature isn't affecting people in the XX, so you have to find what is affecting them. What will affect them moving forward, and then report that story locally, so I think a challenge for journalists around the country is really regionalizing and localizing the biggest story of our time.

TG: Let me pivot to questions about the news industry. What do you think are the most important changes you've seen or experienced in journalism over the last ten years?

I think you hit the nail on the head with the, and this is what everyone in grad school is talking about -- I was in grad school in 2009 for a year at the Annenberg School -- and everyone in academia anyway is trying to figure out how you monetize the online transition...that journalism is in right now. Um, I think that nobody really has an answer for that. And I think it's somewhere between cat videos and hard content, you find a sweet spot where people still come back to your site or want to read your stuff. And with climate change that's a huge challenge, because like I said before, it's not a good news story, so finding the reason to get them to click is, I think, about localizing it; I think it's about providing really powerful visuals and first person accounts. So when you have extreme weather events--connecting the dots. And you have real examples like landslides that you can connect to people's lives--asthma incidences and wildfires. You know, the public health connection I think is going to be really key. But I think the online reporting opportunities I think are huge and really exciting. To be able to map climate change, being able to look at species migration graphically, being able to look at sea level rise in a slow, time-lapse video. I mean those are just some examples of the coverage I've seen happening online that I think is brilliant, and really helps people understand and grasp this big story. I think the other thing we're battling with at the Society for Environmental Journalists is papers are laying off, the New York Times laid off their entire Environment desk. I mean, they're either reassigned to other beats or they're gone. And that's, that's not, the New York Times was the latest and the biggest, but this has been happening all across the country, and we've seen a shift in our membership from being the vast majority print, full-time environment reporters as members of the Society to freelancers, independent producers, podcasters, grant-funded reporters. I mean, this is a very, very different ecosystem for the journalists themselves. And I think that what you loose when you loose the staff reporter who's covering this stuff inside and out and day in and day out is accountability. You loose the people that are checking in on their state officials to say, "are you charging a fuel tax for the oil that's being refined in Washington state? Are you, who's following up on carbon tax legislation? Is that going to happen? What were the latest figures on international energy agencies reports and who's checking in on that? And when you have a general assignment reporter who might take this up if they have a spare minute, you're not getting the quality that you'd get when you have people that are focusing on arguably what is one of the most complex scientific stories anybody's had to deal with ever, I think. It's huge. It's so hard to explain to people what 2 degrees Celsius means versus 5.3 degrees Celsius, and how that relates to gigatons of CO2 emissions. I mean...this is just such a hard story. And I, there are a lot of, unfortunately, more and more hacks that are trying to cover it piecemeal, and picking it up where they can. And, and that is a loss for society, it's a loss of accountability for the people that should be arguably taking action on this stuff. I'm talking about political officials as well as the fossil fuel industry. It's a loss for the general public in terms of understanding what's going on and why...You're losing the watchdog [function] and you're also losing the explanatory capacity.

TG: Have these changes...have they affected you personally?

I mean I can tell you that the job I have now, 240 people applied for it. There are a lot of people that still want to cover this, and they don't have the outlets with money and incomes to do it. It's really, really a shame, because there are a lot of people who could be doing my job, I have no doubt. And it keeps me working hard everyday, because I know how badly, and how valuable this job is. It's a really sad thing that they aren't more people like me covering this in the region. Not that I'm any hot shit, it's more just like, more boots on the ground need to be covering this story, I think. Frankly, the more, the merrier. It's a sad state of affairs. I don't know (), I don't know what the loss, it hasn't affected me personally in the sense that I have my job, I bust ass covering this because I think it's a really important story. But...I know two hundred people who would do my job gladly and are looking for work covering this. I think the other heartening thing, though, I do have somewhat of an upbeat perspective, is that people are figuring out how to do this, and they're covering climate change in new and different ways. [TG: yes, tell me about that]. Like Alex Chadwick's program called "Burn" that did a really good job looking at energy.

And I think it's getting somewhat re-packaged, in the sense that you're talking about energy and energy reporting as opposed to climate change reporting. And if you have to give it a different name because, even the environment word is such a dirty word in some newsrooms. You know, you go to like, Caspar, Wyoming and say you're an environment reporter, and you might be shot. You know, it's not always a safe line of work. Having been to [?] to cover the coal export issue, I can tell you I was careful about how I introduced myself.

So I mean I take heart in the fact that people are still committed to covering this, because people know that this is an important story, and I think the public, I think they do know it's important. And I think they're increasingly frustrated at just the complete blockage in politics to doing anything about it. Because this is really becoming a classist, I think, you know, the 99% is the bulk of the population that's going to bear the most direct impacts of climate change. And I think, I hope more and more people are starting to realize that, but I think without good journalists highlighting the fact that, you know, people who live in the floodplains and the sea level rise areas that can't move are the ones that are going to suffer. And your vacation home in the Hamptons is probably insured for several million dollars anyway. And you're set. Don't worry about it. You'll move somewhere else and get another higher up the cliffside. I think that I'm not saying anything new to you. But the general public though probably doesn't understand that there's also a class system and environmental justice side of this story that without good journalists covering this, those stories aren't going to get told. Because that's the exactly the kind of story that you can be damn sure David Koch doesn't want covered once he buys the Chicago Tribune or the LA Times and closes their environment beat.

TG: Are you hopeful...any avenues opening up for good environmental journalism moving forward?

I think, you know, I had a real estate agent tell me something really interesting the other day and it just occurred to me that it kind of relates to journalism as well. She was saying that, you know, the market was flooded with realtors back when there was a boom in property and everyone was buying and home prices were high. And now that the market's tanked, what you've seen is a really culling of real estate agents. There aren't as many out there, because they can't make a living anymore. And that's starting to change now as we kind of head out of the recession somewhat. But I think the same thing's happened in environmental journalism, where I think that before there were a lot of environmental journalists, and I argue that we always need every newspaper to have somebody covering the environment, even if they're not covering climate change exclusively. But I think what's happening is, you're seeing really, people are just having to get more creative about how they fund their reporting. And the people that are covering it are really passionate about covering it, as opposed to, they get assigned something. I can only speak personally, but I do a better job on the stories I really care about. Of course. I think everyone does...And I think that you have to really care now to cover the environment. ANd you have to really care to cover climate change. And if you can't generate the grant funding to do a special project on climate change, then you're not going to be covering it.

\*\*\*Note: who applies for grants? Freelancers? Or staff reporters? Or both\*\*\*

And so, I think what we're seeing, one example would be PRI's the World just came out with a big series, "What's for Lunch?" or "Food for 9 billion" I think is what the official title is. And so they're talking about climate change affecting food availability across the globe, and that, I believe, Sam Eaton's reporting is probably, I don't know exactly how the funding breakdown works, but I'm guessing he's probably grant funded. Like his travel was probably paid by some Foundation or grant he's applied for. He might make a little bit of money off The World to actually air the stories, but I'm not sure how much money The World has to pay for this stuff. So it's becoming a little bit more of, you have to sort of like pack a bunch of different things [together]. So, you're going on a press junket here, so you do some reporting on this topic while you're there. Or, you know, you get a grant to do short term reporting, the Society of Environmental Journalists is providing individual grants, you know, a couple thousand dollars here and there so people can do things like go to India that cover climate change. Or droughts. And so what you're getting is people that really have done their homework and are really excited and passionate about covering these things, finding that funding, and making sure that these really I think exciting and new projects come to fruition such as "Burn" with Alex Chadwick I would point to. And I would also point to "Food for 9 billion" with The World. And World 6 is going to be doing a whole thing on human health, sorry, public health and climate change impacts. So I think people are getting more creative about it. It's what somewhat gives me hope. That said, it's still not a good news story, don't get me wrong.

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TG: Last question really is your hopes for readers.

Um, that's a really good question. I think, I don't want people to feel apathetic after they hear my stories. I want them to be angry. Because I think that what we're witnessing is profits for the few at the expense of the public health and the public good. This is a tragedy of the commons story, plain and simple. And I think that if people come away feeling apathetic and that, you know, recycling doesn't matter, and biking to work doesn't matter. I can't help that, because I think those things don't really matter. I think what needs to happen is people need to be holding the fossil fuel industry accountable. I think they need holding politicians accountable for our national energy policy that allows us to do things like export our fossil fuels to be burned elsewhere, while saying that we're lowering our CO2 emissions...My hope for my reporting moving forward is that instead of doing these sort of one-off "green" stories that are like "bike to work!" or "composting helps!" or "methane digesters are generating power off of pig farms!" like "pat on the back, great work" doesn't matter at all until we figure out our energy policy, until we hold fossil fuel companies accountable for what's going on, big picture. We're talking gigatons now. This is a gigaton problem. This is not a local problem anymore. So it's such a hard story to cover in that sense, that you need to be talking big while you're talking local. But the solutions are unfortunately, I think, the local solutions are becoming more and more a drop in the bucket in the face of these bigger, bigger forces that are at play here with exporting and burning of fossil fuels globally. So I don't know, I think I'm using my time best when I'm holding the bigger corporations accountable as opposed to covering "news you can use." I think that for readers, my hope is that they hear stories and they think about "well, if we're not doing anything about a carbon tax in Washington State, here's a legislator who is. I'm going to fund his campaign. And not because [X] told me to, but because I heard his name as somebody who's being forward-thinking about this, and talking about it, and tackling it in a really tough way in perhaps a hostile political environment, and I'm going to help him do that more in the future." Or you know, "I'm not buying gas from this company anymore, and I'm going to write to my Congressman and say he needs to tax the shit out of them, because they're taking oil into the State of Washington to be refined from the Tar Sands." You know, I mean, kind of providing information that might inspire action is my hope for my reporting. Having said that, I'm very careful to never tell people what they should or should not do. I'm here purely to share information.