

YELLOWSTONE MEDIA MYTHS: PRINT AND TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE 1988 FIRES

Conrad Smith^{*}

Abstract—This paper draws on comments from 89 reporters who covered the fires, on comments from 146 of their news sources, and on evaluations of network television coverage by four groups of wildfire experts. The research also incorporates a content analysis of stories about the fires that appeared in Yellowstone-area and elite newspapers. The results suggest that reporters sometimes made serious factual errors, and often did a poor job of reporting on ecological issues and fire management policy. There were substantial differences in how the fires were covered by different news organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Molotch and Lester (1974, 1975), who examined hundreds of newspaper stories about the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, concluded that the contents of the news accounts were not determined by objective characteristics of the spill, but rather by a power struggle among various news sources who had vested interests in differing interpretations of the event. Only the local newspaper framed the story in the way it was perceived by Santa Barbara residents.

In the present paper, coverage of the Yellowstone fires by six newspapers and the three television networks is interpreted as a power struggle among sources offering two competing interpretations of the event: 1) Enlightened public land managers attempted to maintain the ecological integrity of a pristine national park by following a scientifically-based fire suppression regime which treated wildfire as a natural and necessary part of the biological process that shaped the ecosystem, and 2) Inept government bureaucrats allowed a national treasure to be destroyed because of their insensitivity to the beauty of Yellowstone forests and a cavalier attitude towards the fears of local residents and the right of local merchants to realize a fair return from investments in tourist-related business ventures.

BACKGROUND

On its surface, news can be viewed as an objective account of reality, as an impartial reflection of what happened. This is the newsgathering model offered by many journalists, and the goal described by various professional codes of journalistic ethics, which identify the search for truth as the most basic goal of all journalistic endeavors. In the real world of newsgathering, however, reporters must make many value-driven choices that shape the ensuing stories. Who to interview? What questions to ask? Which facts to include at the expense of others that are left out? What angles should be emphasized? What kinds of stories are being written by competing reporters? What instructions have been received

from an editor or producer? How much time is there before deadline? What kind of story will advance my career?

The impression made by news accounts is also shaped by editorial decisions that determine when the story is important enough for a newspaper or network to assign a reporter rather than relying on wire service accounts, the decision about who to assign to the story, and the decision about where to place the story and how much time or space to give it.

The Yellowstone fires were difficult to cover to the extent that they occurred outside the normal news routine. National reporters had to find their bearings in an unfamiliar place, and to seek information and identify new sources from scratch. Most of journalism has to do with routine stories covered from fixed locations through repeated contact with established sources. On the other hand, the urban fire is one of the most basic stories in the journalist's repertoire, and that made coverage easier because the urban fire model could be used as a model for covering wildfires. When reporters have little expertise about an event, they are more likely to rely on their personal values to interpret it (Gans 1979), and more likely to borrow information and story angles from other reporters (Gitlin 1980). Research by Patterson (1989) and Wilkins (1987) indicates that disaster coverage tends to focus on immediate events rather than the context in which they occur, and suggests that these stories are often told in terms of cultural stereotypes and not as objective accounts of what happened. A study of news stories about environmental issues related to construction of the Tellico Dam (Glynn and Timms 1982) indicated that the snail darter fish itself, rather than the issues, dominated coverage.

Media scholar Gaye Tuchman (1978) says that journalists create news stories by transforming real events into a socially constructed "reality" that meets the organizational needs of news work. Some sources and facts are discarded, she observes, because of shared notions among journalists about what constitutes news. This process, according to sociologist David Altheide (1976), often distorts events by removing them from the context in which they occurred. "Journalists,"

^{*}School of Journalism, The Ohio State University, 242 West 18th Ave., Columbus, Ohio, 43210.

writes Altheide, "look for angles, interest, and entertainment value." Some of the ways in which reporters frame news, according to Gitlin (1980), "can be attributed to traditional assumptions in news treatment: news concerns the event, not the underlying condition; the person, not the group; conflict, not consensus; the fact that advances the story, not the one that explains it."

Many of the reporters who covered the Yellowstone fires were general assignment reporters rather than specialists in regional or environmental subjects. Herbert Gans (1979) observes that general assignment reporters "are like tourists, albeit in their own culture; they seek out what is memorable and perceive what clashes with the things they take for granted." Because of this, national news accounts of local stories are almost always inaccurate and exaggerated.

METHOD

This study is based on examination of 814 news accounts about the Yellowstone fires that appeared in 1988 in three elite American newspapers (the New York Times, Washington Post and Los Angeles Times), three Yellowstone-area newspapers (the Billings, MT Gazette, the Bozeman, MT Daily Chronicle and the Casper, WY Star Tribune), and in the evening newscasts of the three commercial television networks. The three elite newspapers are widely considered America's best and most prominent, while the three area newspapers circulate in Yellowstone and adjacent communities.

Yellowstone-area newspaper stories were obtained from the newspapers themselves, and newspaper employees judged whether individual stories should be categorized as being about the Yellowstone fires. Stories from the elite newspapers were obtained from the **VuText** and Nexis electronic databases, which allowed computer retrieval of all stories that contained the words "Yellowstone" and "fire" or "wildfire" (except for wire service stories in the Washington Post, which are not included in either database). Television stories were obtained from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive in Nashville.

The New York Times, which is published in the nation's media capital, received special scrutiny. It is widely read by journalists, and is often used by the networks and by journalists not only as a source of news, but also as a guide to the importance of stories and as a guide to how to cover stories (Gitlin 1980).

This paper also draws on two earlier studies by the author. One was about the Yellowstone fires as seen by 68 print journalists who covered them and by 146 news sources for

newspapers and news magazine stories (Smith 1989a). The other was based on evaluations of all 1988 evening network television stories about the fires by incident commanders, forest ecologists, wildfire behavior experts, and fire management policy experts (Smith 1989b).

RESULTS

Each of the six newspapers published its first account of the Yellowstone fires between July 1 and July 8. ABC and NBC television broadcast their first stories on July 25, after the evacuation of Grant Village. The first CBS story was broadcast on August 22, when soldiers joined the firefighting effort.

The Yellowstone fires were more newsworthy in the west than in the east. They made the front page of the Los Angeles Times 39 times, starting on July 18 with a news brief about wildfires in the west; the front page of the Washington Post three times, starting on September 8 after the fire's visit to the Old Faithful Geyser Complex; and the front page of the New York Times three times, starting on September 11 when the secretaries of Interior and Agriculture arrived in Yellowstone for an inspection. Stories about the fires appeared in the first five pages of the Washington Post 17 times, but only three times (the front page stories) in the New York Times.

The first Los Angeles Times story written by a full-time staff reporter for the paper (Tamara Jones) was published on August 24. The Los Angeles Times did not use freelance stringers to cover the fires. The Washington Post and New York Times, however, relied partly on outsiders. Freelancer Geoffrey O'Gara wrote seven stories for the Post. The first of these appeared on July 17. The New York Times also made use of material provided by stringers, starting with an August 10 article by Jim Robbins.

Although fire visited the Old Faithful geyser complex only on September 7, the geyser was a recurrent theme in news stories as a symbol of the park. Old Faithful is mentioned in 13 of 47 stories about the fires in the New York Times, in 13 of 41 stories about the fires in the Washington Post, and in 24 of 75 stories in the Los Angeles Times. The first stories on ABC and NBC also mentioned Old Faithful, and pictures of the geyser appeared in 18 network stories about the fires.

All of the Yellowstone fires were classified as wildfires on July 21, and were subjected to full suppression (Christensen 1989). However, I was unable to find any mention of this fact in any news report published or broadcast during July or August. Several news organizations did quote Interior Secretary Donald Hodel as saying on July 27 that all new fires would be suppressed (emphasis added), but many reporters retained the impression some fires were being allowed to burn unchallenged, and perhaps unmonitored, through all of August and into September.

Coverage in the New York Times

A free-lance story by Jim Robbins (1988a), published in the New York Times on August 10, said the abandoned natural-bum policy was still in effect, and was "the talk of the campgrounds and restaurants" in the Yellowstone area. Four days later, another story (Robbins 1988b) said that some fires were being fought, but that a dozen were being allowed to burn. On September 1, yet another New York Times story (Wilson 1988), said "Some of the fires are allowed to burn unchallenged as part of a philosophy that holds they are a natural process." A September 10 article (Shabecoff 1988) described criticism of Yellowstone's natural-bum policy by Wyoming senators Alan Simpson and Malcolm Wallop without explaining that suppression of all fires began in July.

Seven weeks after all fires were in suppression mode, the Nation's most influential and prestigious newspaper thus continued to support the myth that some of the fires were being allowed to burn. A search through the Nexis computer database for all 1988 New York Times stories containing the words "correction" and "Yellowstone" indicates that no corrections of this mistake were ever published.

The language used to frame New York Times stories about the fires sometimes encouraged the idea that they were being managed ineptly and insensitively. On August 14: "It may seem strange to a generation that grew up with stern admonitions from Smokey Bear, but the Park Service refuses to use words like 'damage' or 'destruction,' and instead describes how the fires will rejuvenate aging park forests and benefit wildlife" (Robbins 1988b, emphasis added). This clearly implies deviant behavior ("strangeness" and the "refusal" to use "reasonable" language). On September 11, in the Times' first front-page story about the fires: "(O)fficials could not keep up with reports of areas threatened by the blazes." "Evacuations were so numerous it was hard for park officials to keep track of them." (Robbins 1988d). The language here implies a park administration in disarray. On that same day, the major local paper, the Billings Gazette, had no trouble keeping track of the same evacuations. September 22: "(E)ven at the height of the fires, bulldozers were allowed into the park only on a case by case basis" (Egan 1988, emphasis added). The qualifying phrase tends to cast doubt on the management policy.

When Democratic Presidential candidate Michael Dukakis visited Yellowstone on September 15, the Times was the only elite newspaper to include an observation alluding to the Bambi myth that animals cope poorly with wildfire. The account describes Dukakis reading a letter from a firefighter received from a little girl who wrote, "I wish you could help the animals" (Toner 1988).

The kinds of factual errors described above continued in the second New York Times front-page story, published on September 22 (Egan 1988). This story said that the government had a policy of allowing all naturally-caused fires in parks and wilderness areas to burn themselves out, and also that the Forest Service has a policy of fighting all fires in National Forests. The story said, incorrectly, that Interior Secretary Hodel had ordered on July 21 that all fires be fought.

A September 14 New York Times editorial supported the National Park Service by stating that the fires were not a disaster, as Interior Secretary Hodel had said they were, but helped perpetuate the myth that natural ecosystems are static rather than dynamic, and supported the notion that it might have been possible to preserve Yellowstone forever as it was before the fires. "Yellowstone may take years," the editorial said, "to grow back exactly as it was" (emphasis added).

The first New York Times story about scientific aspects of [the 1988 wildfires (Malcolm 1988)] was thoughtful and thorough, although it was not published until the end of September when the fires were largely under control. It contained interviews with Yellowstone research biologist Don Despain, with Cornell soil biologist Susan Riha, with fire-behavior expert Richard Rothermel, and with wildfire historian Stephen Pyne.

Coverage in the Washington Post

Stories in the Washington Post tended to be less judgmental than those in the New York Times, and tended to contain fewer factual errors. The first non-wire story (O'Gara 1988a) described fire as a positive influence on the forest, although it also helped establish the myth that Old Faithful was threatened by a "natural burn" fire when it attributed the human-ignited North Fork fire (the only one that ever threatened the Old Faithful tourist complex) to lightning. The second non-wire story (O'Gara 1988b) contained a reasonably good description of the natural-burn philosophy that later became controversial. The Post interviewed fire experts Don Despain and Richard Rothermel two months earlier than the New York Times (O'Gara 1988c). Unlike the New York Times and the three television networks, the Post specifically pointed out that the North Fork fire, which made the September 7 run on Old Faithful, and which caused all but one of the major evacuations in the park, was never subject to the natural-burn policy (Reid and Peterson 1988).

Coverage in the Los Angeles Times

The east-coast newspapers framed the fires as being more controversial than the Los Angeles Times. Although the New York Times mentioned controversy about Yellowstone's natural-burn policy on August 10, and the Washington Post first ran a story describing the controversy on August 9, the Los Angeles Times did not allude to any controversy about Yellowstone's natural-burn policy until September 1, and then only in an editorial endorsing the wisdom of that policy.

“Most of the complaints,” the editorial said, “have come from a handful of landowners who have felt threatened by the **raging** fires and from business owners on the periphery of Yellowstone who have suffered economic losses because of the fall-off of tourism.” This frames the **fires** quite differently from the September 22 New York Times story that said the fires had led to unspecified but “widespread” criticism of **the** government’s natural-bum policy (Egan 1988).

The Los Angeles Times **carried** a second editorial on September 13 that said the “unwarranted criticism of the Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service and environmental experts has reached a level of misinformed hysteria that is racing out of control, as the fires have done.” This was followed by two op-ed columns supporting the scientific validity of the natural-bum policy, published on September 17 and September 26. On September 22, the Times **carried** an article that suggested officials were overreacting when they canceled a planned prescribed burn in the Santa Monica Mountains because of negative publicity about the Yellowstone **fires** (Fuentes 1988).

Stories in the Los Angeles Times were presented in a way that interpreted the Yellowstone fires as more natural and less alarming than stories in the eastern elite newspapers. Yellowstone-area residents described in the New York Times and Washington Post tended to be critics of Yellowstone’s fire management efforts. One of the very few local residents described in the Los Angeles Times, a merchant whose business was given a **25-percent** chance of surviving one of the fires, was framed more positively. Ralph Glidden was quoted as saying “I’m trusting the professionals involved in this will do what they can do” (Los Angeles Times 1988).

The Television Networks

Like the New York Times, and perhaps following the example set by the Times, the three television networks continued to suggest that fires were being allowed to bum in Yellowstone long **after** that policy had been abandoned. The last such story on ABC was broadcast on August 25. NBC implied on September 6 that **fires** were still being allowed to burn, and CBS did so on September 7. The biggest difference in how the three networks framed the story was the differing ways in which they selected interviews with local residents and tourists. CBS and NBC focused on tourists and residents who were critics of Yellowstone’s fire management policy, but ABC did not carry a single critical comment on park policy by a local resident or tourist.

NBC and CBS lent credibility to the Bambi myth of animals fleeing from the fires; ABC did not. CBS, for example, implied large-scale fire-induced migration in a September 7 story that said some Yellowstone animals had been spotted 50 miles from their normal range. NBC twice focused on

pictures of animals that appeared either to be fleeing the flames (September 8) or to be confused by the thick smoke (August 25). ABC specifically said that moose didn’t seem to notice the fires (August 25), and showed elk calmly grazing at Mammoth Hot Springs on September 9 as evacuation loomed.

The Yellowstone-Area Newspapers

Of the three daily newspapers in the Yellowstone area, one (the Casper, WY Star Tribune) circulates primarily outside the direct economic influence of Yellowstone Park. The other two (the Billings, MT Gazette and the Bozeman, MT Daily Chronicle), circulate heavily within the area directly **affected** by the Yellowstone tourist trade. Perhaps for that reason, the Casper Star Tribune carried virtually no stories about the effects of the Yellowstone fires on area businesses, while the Gazette and Chronicle carried many such **articles**.

The Star Tribune framed the fires as more natural and less disruptive than either of the Montana newspapers, and carried several stories and a column about the ecological benefits of the fires. The Bozeman Daily Chronicle adopted a relatively calm tone in describing the **fires**, but virtually ignored the scientific perspective about fire’s biological role. The Billings Gazette carried far more stories about the fires than either of the other papers, and published many thoughtful and well-reported articles, especially those reported by Robert Ekey. But the Gazette also published many letters containing sharp attacks against the National Park Service and against specific officials of Yellowstone National Park, and published an editorial cartoon that ridiculed Yellowstone superintendent Robert **Barbee**. An August 29 Gazette editorial said “This fiasco is riddled with questions, and it’s not too late for Congress to demand to know why **Barbee** blindly rode a dead policy into hell.” A September 11 editorial called for the firing not only of Superintendent **Barbee**, but also of the Director of the National Park Service and the Secretary of the Interior.

Coverage of the Natural Burn Policy

Because virtually all of the controversy that made the Yellowstone fires newsworthy centered around the policy that initially allowed many lightning-ignited fires to bum monitored but unsuppressed, it would have been reasonable to expect detailed articles about that policy’s origins. Although most news organizations paid lip **service** to explaining the policy by explaining the role of fire in “cleansing” or “renewing” the forest, I was unable to locate a single article on the news pages of any of the newspapers published in 1988, or a single story in any of the evening network newscasts broadcast in 1988, that specifically mentioned the Leopold Report (Leopold 1963) that formed the philosophical foundation for the prescribed natural-fire policy. The Leopold Report was mentioned only once in all of the stories, in a December 11 New York Times Magazine article by Peter Matthiessen.

DISCUSSION

The New York Times and two of the three television networks lent considerable credence to the **interpretation** of the Yellowstone fires favored by local merchants and their elected representatives (including senators Wallop and Simpson of Wyoming and **Baucus** of Montana). This interpretation suggested that the National Park Service handled the fires ineptly. This reinforces findings by Molotch and Lester (1974, **1975**), who predicted that business interests and federal officials would have more power to define the context in which the news media interpreted the fires than would environmentalists, scientists, or Yellowstone officials. However, the Washington Post and ABC television news framed the fires more neutrally, and the Los Angeles Times interpreted them as natural and as a somewhat positive event.

Myths About the Fires

For the purposes of this paper, there are two kinds of myths that help us define and explain features of the external world about which we have **insufficient** or incorrect knowledge. The first sort of myth is usually based on inadequate or inaccurate information, such as the idea inspired by the Disney film *Bambi* that animals flee in terror **from** forest fires. The second form of myth rises out of our effort to understand events that contradict cultural assumptions. For example, **often** assumed is that modern technology can extinguish forest fires. If the fires in Yellowstone are still burning, the reasoning goes, there must be some kind of conspiracy to mislead the public about fire suppression efforts. This myth probably gained credibility because of the initial policy not to suppress some of **the** naturally ignited fires.

The news media helped foster several myths about the Yellowstone fires. The most widely disseminated myth was that many of the fires were allowed to burn unsuppressed throughout August and into September. The New York Times and the three television networks also helped spread the myth that the most newsworthy of the fires, which was apparently started by a woodcutter's cigarette, spread because of the park's natural-burn policy. The North Fork fire was fought with available resources from the day it started.

By quoting park critics and tourists who lamented the fire-induced changes in Yellowstone ("it won't be the same for a hundred years"), many media accounts supported the idea that Yellowstone is a static rather than dynamic ecosystem, and that it could be managed like a city park in which burned trees can be replaced by planting new ones, and in which elk can escape mortality if only they are provided with enough supplemental food. To a large degree, reporters failed to understand (or at least to communicate) the dynamic forces that shaped the way Yellowstone looked **before** the 1988 fires.

Another myth, which has deep roots in the technological orientation of our culture, persisted despite minimal support from the media. This myth, that humans have the technology to control all wildfires, was regularly debunked by news accounts quoting firefighters and other officials who said only a change in the weather would put the fires out. This myth flourished in spite of the media.

The mythological way the **media** interpreted the fires is apparent in the fact that Old Faithful geyser was featured in about a quarter of **all** the stories in the elite press and on national television newscasts, despite the fact that only a small fraction of those stories **dealt** with the single day on which a fire actually made a run on the geyser. Other prominent Yellowstone features, such as Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone Lake, and Yellowstone Falls, were seldom mentioned. A person not familiar with the park could easily have gotten the impression that Old Faithful Geyser was the only real attraction in the park, and that virtually all of the Yellowstone **firefighting** efforts in 1988 were part of a massive effort to save the geyser from destruction.

News as a Curriculum

Media scholar James W. Carey (1986) believes it is "unforgivably self-righteous" to criticize daily news accounts because they often fail to put news events into a perspective that explains how they happened and what they mean. He says news is a curriculum, and that it is unfair to expect the initial reports of any *event* to provide complete information about what happened. Considering the short deadlines under which daily journalists must operate, this perspective has some merit. But it does not explain why some interpretations of events are more likely than others, and does not explain why a major newspaper like the New York Times consistently failed to report that all Yellowstone fires were being fought.

All of the media organizations studied here published or broadcast thoughtful reports and analyses of the Yellowstone fires after they were brought under control in 1988, and all of the organizations continued to follow the story in 1989. Although these analyses were less prominently displayed than the initial dramatic stories about the fire's various runs, the persistent media consumer was eventually able to get a balanced picture of the fires, especially if she or he supplemented ordinary news sources with specialized magazines such as Audubon and Smithsonian. Media consumers without that kind of dedication, however, were likely to be misled by the high visibility of the stories that **characterized** the initial coverage. The panels of experts who evaluated all of the 1988 evening television stories about the Yellowstone fires rated the stories **during** the peak coverage period, when the fires got top-of-the-show coverage, as significantly less accurate than the stories that appeared earlier or later (two-tail t-test, p (0.001).

The lesson here is that the initial news coverage of any unanticipated natural event, such as the 1988 Yellowstone fires, is likely to contain many flaws. It may be **unrealistic** and even uncharitable to expect journalists to do a better job, but as long as the public has confidence in the news media, these shortcomings will continue to mislead newspaper readers and television viewers. These misinformed media consumers may support land-management decisions that are based on interpretations of events provided by special interests rather than on scientific research or long-term management goals.

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