

## **The Story Itself: Lessons and Hopes from the Yellowstone Fire Media Event**

*Paul Schullery*

Technical Writer  
Research Division  
Post Office Box 168  
Yellowstone National Park,  
Wyoming 82190

Based on a talk given to the  
*Montana Project Wild Workshop*,  
Yellowstone Park, April 1, 1989

A few years ago I was living in Livingston, Montana, working as a writer, and I accepted a few assignments from *Newsweek*. The last of those assignments was to cover the famous "Mountain Man Kidnapping" at Big Sky. I put some time in making phone calls, chased around talking to officers, and, as the newsweekly people say, "filed some graphs" on the story. After an editor in New York had digested the material I sent him, he wrote up the story, then called me to read it back to me.

As he read, I occasionally recognized information I hadn't given him. At one point I interrupted him and said, "Now you didn't get that from me: I didn't know that." And he responded—get this—"Let'em sue us."

Now I think most of us have at one time or another discovered—usually when the subject was something we knew a little about—that the news media make a lot of mistakes. That's hardly news—in fact, I doubt it will *ever* make the news—and there isn't much sport in media-bashing. Even if there were, I'm not sure I'm in a good position to do it. I'm author, co-author, or editor of sixteen books and more than 100 articles; by almost anyone's definition, I must be part of the problem.

But it's a real problem, and the fires of 1988 reminded me, as few other things have, of just how big a problem it is. I spent the summer of 1988 trying to learn about the fires by watching the network news in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I knew, from my few contacts with friends in the park, that things weren't coming out straight in the news, but I had no idea how crooked they *were* coming out.

Then in early September I accepted my present position with the National Park Service as a Technical Writer. On September 13 I arrived at park headquarters and hurried directly to my new boss—and old friend—John Varley's office. We climbed into his car and drove south—toward Norris Geyser Basin.

Almost immediately, we were traveling through areas that, according to the computer graphics on the nightly news, were blasted like ground zero, and I realized that I'd been had. As I gaped around, I mumbled something about not expecting to see so much green. John told me that that was the almost universal reaction of people the first time they saw what actually happened during the fires. The media fouled up this story in a big way. Yellowstone's fires were obviously huge, but their effects and meanings were nowhere near as clear as the media suggested.

### **A Reprieve for the Real Story**

Normally, that kind of problem would be without solution, and without result besides a sadly misinformed public. But this time we got lucky. Dr. Conrad Smith of the Ohio State University School of Journalism recognized in the fires an extraordinary research opportunity, and whether or not the public ever figures out what really happened in Yellowstone, those of us more closely involved will at least have the satisfaction of knowing what went wrong in much greater detail than we ever imagined we would.

Dr. Smith is a specialist in the analysis of environmental reporting, and he tells us that the

Yellowstone fires got more attention from the mainstream national media than any other natural resource issue in recent history—more than Three Mile Island, Bhopal, or the snail darter. Yellowstone is magic, and its "destruction" really flipped a switch in the news organizations.

Dr. Smith is working on an extended project, through which he and his colleagues will review, computerize, and quantitatively evaluate more than a million words of local, regional, and national newspaper coverage as well as all television coverage on the evening news of the three major networks. This will eventually result in any number of papers and a book, but has already resulted in some wonderfully provocative observations.

He started by explaining that "the media abhors complexity," pointing out that most reporters are generalists. He wrote, in his preliminary research proposal, that, "Journalists who do not have the specialized expertise to thoroughly understand technical and scientific aspects of a story tend to avoid writing about them in a substantive way. Published content analyses of how the press covered environmental stories such as at Three Mile Island, the Snail Darter controversy, and the chemical leak at Bhopal suggest journalists in these circumstances tend to focus on discrete events while trivializing or sensationalizing related issues."

There is more here than lack of expertise or simple incompetence. In my own experience, it seems to me that reporters are generally very smart people, and many working on the Yellowstone fires showed extraordinary energy. The

problem is more subtle than that. As Dr. Smith explained, there are many biases built in to the uninformed mind. Most reporters have experience with one kind of fire: urban house fire. Such fires are always bad, and are always suppressed as fast as possible. Given that cultural baggage, there was bound to be a lot of confusion when the reporters got to Yellowstone and discovered that we had actually let fires go. As Dr. Smith put it, "If my house caught fire, and a week later it was still burning, I'd be upset too."

But Dr. Smith said that it wasn't really the anti-fire bias that eventually caused the press to "screw up" (his term) so often. In his preliminary analysis of 112 news stories, he discovered that the average error rate was only about twice the normal rate, which, sad though it was, was within the range of acceptability in today's media (two of the worst jobs of reporting, he determined, were done by Jim Coates of the *Chicago Tribune* and Tim Egan of *The New York Times*). But that didn't bother him as much as his persistent feeling that they missed the real story.

Reporters arrived here already determined, by their past experiences and the limitations of their training, that this was a disaster story, or in the more formal language of journalism, a "disorder story." Dr. Smith explained that according to one system of story classification, there are four categories of disorder: natural, technological, social, and moral:

*"The Yellowstone fires were treated by journalists as both a natural and social disorder story. Some reporters also treated them as a technological*

*disorder story, because the fires could not be suppressed; and as a moral disorder story, because the park's wildfire policy did not require immediate suppression of all fires."*

I'm sure you can see the many consequences and complications of approaching the Yellowstone fires this way. So much was going on here, in science, in forestry, in philosophical debates, that just didn't fit the mold. Many reporters apparently showed up knowing that this was not news unless something went wrong. There had to be someone to blame, and there had to be something to blame them for.

Understand that the problem here is beside the question of whether or not the agencies did a good job with the fires. The formal review process that followed the fires revealed any number of administrative mistakes, problems, and complications that occurred during the fighting of the fires. Reporters are supposed to be skeptical and look for error. But they are supposed to do it in an objective and informed manner. What Dr. Smith was proposing, and what many of us witnessed, was that many in the media started with a presumption, arrived at subconsciously or intuitively before even getting here, that their assignment was to report what went wrong rather than what happened. However much may in fact have gone wrong, that presumption was not a neutral or professionally defensible place to start.

The effect of this poor start was most obvious on the evening news. Television reporters at a disaster have among their leading goals a need to interview victims.

When reporters looked around here for victims, the only handy ones were local merchants, who, according to Dr. Smith, were vastly overrepresented in the television coverage, and presented as authoritative, knowledgeable sources of information with no effort to check their actual qualifications or expertise. Being handy was the only requirement.

My own saddest recollection of this phenomenon was of watching the coverage of the Cooke City crisis. The fire was the Storm Creek Fire, originating on the Custer National Forest miles north of Yellowstone Park. This fire was initially managed as a natural fire under the terms of Custer National Forest's natural fire plan, but as it grew larger it was aggressively fought. In fact, the town was actually threatened by a man-caused backburn set to deflect the main fire. But for television, it was much simpler, and so we were treated to views of the torching trees right on the edge of town, interspersed with interviews with local businesspeople who complained bitterly about the Park Service fire policy. Very few viewers would have assumed anything except that the fire was the result of park policy.

What worsened the situation for both managers and the public was that the whole fire season became an event driven as much by the media as by the heat and wind (though heat and wind isn't all that bad a term to apply to the media, I guess).

For example, park plant ecologist Don Despain was in the field one day preparing a study plot in the path of a fire. He was accompanied by a reporter from the *Denver Post*, and they were dis-

cussing the scientific excitement of being able to study this little plot both before and after the burn. In that discussion, Don said, enthusiastically, "*burn baby burn*." In no time, his remark about his study plot was the source of public indignation, and he was represented as celebrating the so-called "destruction" of the entire park. As Dr. Smith noted, "When Wyoming Senator Malcom Wallop during his reelection campaign called for resignations of Department of Interior and National Park Service officials, he referred to an August 28 *Denver Post* story as justification." The news exercised extreme political power in those smoky days.

Incidentally, when Dr. Smith visited the park this winter, he went through the same "media shock treatment" I did. After driving through some of the park, and looking at the burn maps, he said he had to lower his expectations of the extent of the burns by an order of magnitude. He later wrote me that the experience of studying the media reaction to the Yellowstone fires had a big effect on him professionally:

*Studying media coverage of the fires has changed how I teach. Based on what I found, a colleague has started paying less attention to students' spelling and grammar, putting more emphasis on the story itself. I hope the research, when published, will bring changes in how journalism is taught and practiced. But I'm not counting on it.*

I'm not either. As the spring and summer of 1989 have progressed, there has been a second media event, as the press has reported on the "rebirth" of the

park. This has been, in most cases, an upbeat story about natural regeneration, a "good news" item that has had a higher level of accuracy. I think, but that is in its

this and the other fires. Part of the problem was that there are very few qualified Incident Information Officers in the NPS."

The story of the information

program involved the daily map of fire perimeters produced on desk-top computers by Yellowstone staff. The map, on an 8.5 x 11 sheet revised daily, showed huge black blotches spreading across the landscape, and though the text prominently said that as much as half of the area within the perimeters of the fires was not burned, the visual effect of solid blackness was the durable one in most people's minds. These maps were probably the source of those stunning computer graphics on network news, where vast portions of the park suddenly burst into vivid orange flames while America watched in horror. These little maps did not visually portray the complex nature of the burn "mosaic," and so burn perimeters were immediately confused with total burn acreages. Predictably, the press used the largest numbers available.

Another complication resulted from the Park Service's efforts to explain the ecological effects of the fires (and of park policy). Early in the fire season, when the fires were "behaving" and acting like everyone's notion of "good" fires, the park's interpreters and administrators told what later became known as the happy-face story. They explained, as they had during the 16 previous years of the natural fire plan's existence, that fire has a well documented role in wilderness settings, and Yellowstone and other national parks and federal lands embarked years before on a program to reestablish that role. The ecological truths were self-evident. Fire is our friend.

But then the fires got less and less friendly, and to many people the park's message of fire as an

appropriate wilderness inhabitant began to sound hollow. Worse, as commercial interests near the park began to suffer, or perceive a risk to their well-being, many people saw the happy-face story as an insult, proof of the Park Service's insensitivity to the needs and economic welfare of the surrounding communities. The least attentive seemed to assume that the Park Service was not only happy about the ecological effects of the fires, but was also happy about the harm being done to local economies. Eventually, Yellowstone officials and interpreters were told, by Washington, to tone down the happy-face story, but most park personnel continued to celebrate the ecological wonder of the fires whenever possible.

There are a couple of ironies here. One is that because of the huge amount of money spent on the fire fighting effort, the fires seem to have boosted many (but by no means all) local business incomes above the average summer's. The other is that now, after the fires are out and the region's mood is calmer, the surrounding states and businesses, as well as many media people, have adopted the Park Service's once-hated happy-face story almost to the letter. Chambers of Commerce are speaking in glowing terms of the "great re-birth" of Yellowstone, and celebrating the wonder of ecological process at every opportunity, in the hope of luring visitors back to see the "new Yellowstone."

They are right to do so, of course, but they might not have to do it so aggressively if they hadn't been so loud and bitter (and visible, on the nightly news) last summer in proclaiming that Yellowstone was being destroyed.

Whether or not the Park Service, Forest Service, and the many commercial interests can change America's mind—that is, can convince the public that Yellowstone wasn't destroyed after all—is an important question that won't be answered for a few years. As of early August, 1989, Yellowstone Park visitation is quite high, certainly above average, leading to a whole new round of opinions over the fires: they increased visitation; they will temporarily increase visitation but in the long run visitation will decline; they had no effect on visitation. In any event, the fires will no doubt be mentioned as a factor for many years any time visitation trends appear worrisome. There is great comfort in being able to place blame.

But so far I've been talking mostly about agency communications on the big scale—dealing with the media, facing the political realities of a policy that was suddenly very unpopular, and that sort of thing. As my work got underway, and I spent more time talking to the people who had been thinking hard about these fires all summer, I learned that there were far more complicated pitfalls facing both the managers and the public.

The one that has engaged my attention most has been the rhetorical one. What does it mean to say that Yellowstone was "reborn" in the spring of 1989? There isn't an ecologist in the neighborhood who believes the place ever died; it just moved, dramatically and rapidly, along to a new stage in its complex of ecological processes. Why do our friends keep trying to reassure people by saying things like, "It's

not as bad as it looks," when in an ecological sense it's not bad, or good, or ugly, or anything but a natural process doing what natural processes do? Why do we keep telling people that the fires will "improve" habitat for the famous big animals when we're not in the husbandry business here? We're not out to raise the greatest number of creatures; we're out to protect the processes by which nature determines how many of each creature is enough. How can we get the news people to be more careful in using terms like "catastrophe" and "devastation" to describe the very processes that gave us this landscape in the first place? In short, how do we help unload a very loaded language?

### **Where Does All This Leave Us?**

At this point in preparing this presentation, it looked to me as if my only possible conclusion for you educators—that is, the only message you can take back to your colleagues and your students—is "Trust No One." But upon reflection I realized that there are some reasons for hope and some things to learn.

Of course the fires taught us how much Americans really do care about this place, even if their understanding of it is limited and their perceptions of the fires were sadly damaged. But that's just good news, not instruction. There is a more general lesson, one that applies to school children no more than it applies to reporters.

Schools and park interpreters can never hope to prepare children for the specifics of every news story. It is not a failing of the American education system that very few people knew enough

about fire ecology and fire policy to intelligently evaluate the news. It is, however, a failing of the American education system that neither the reporters nor the public were sufficiently prepared, or educated, to react intelligently to the *idea* of the fires. Learning to think clearly and carefully—learning how to see the red flags in bad reporting, or in bureaucratic double-talk, for example—is the best we can hope for.

And we must be prepared to work with, not against, the established conventions of modern media. A friend of mine who worked at the information center at the Unified Area Command in West Yellowstone told me that the most hostile people, the ones most outraged by the fires or by fire policy, were often completely unresponsive to the staff. Uniformed NPS, USFS, or BLM personnel could make no headway at calm discussion. But those same angry people would sit in front of a television monitor and watch a professionally prepared video that said the same things the staff said, and would go away much calmed, even converted. Just as they believed Dan Rather when he said Yellowstone was being destroyed, they believed this anonymous commentator when he said it was not. The medium was everything. It's a lesson we must not forget.

But it's often not an easy lesson to follow. Yellowstone Superintendent Bob Barbee recently explained to me the frustration of trying to deal in television's notorious "ten second sound bites," knowing that only the most clever, or the most powerful, or the most controversial film clips would be used from the hours of taping that

might be done, and that if you wanted to be sure that *your* voice was heard, you had to worry more about saying something colorful than about saying something meaningful. Yellowstone's management issues are invariably complex, and yet television demands simplicity and brevity at the same times that it demands excitement.

On November 6, 1988, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a beautiful photo feature on the fires. One of the largest pictures showed the Arrow burn, near Obsidian Creek. Here, a burn of 10 years ago was reburned, leaving very little fuel in sight, hardly a typical Yellowstone fire scene. Another large picture—a full page—showed a portion of the "blowdown" along the road between Norris and Canyon, where a windstorm a few years ago knocked over hundreds of trees. The trees, with their stark upended roots, were burned in 1988. Neither caption explained that these were not typical fire scenes; readers could only assume that this was the sort of "devastation" that was common in Yellowstone. Those images will no doubt haunt many readers for a long time.

The challenge facing people who care about the parks—including administrators, researchers, writers, educators, and the media—is not to replace those images with bright green ones, but to inspire readers to a fuller appreciation of what the images really mean.

### **Suggested Readings On the Media, Rhetoric, and the Yellowstone Fires**

Barbee, R., and P. Schullery. Yellowstone:



the smoke clears. National Parks 63(2-3):18-19.

Reid, T. R. When the press yelled 'fire!' Washington Post, July 30, 1989. D5.

Smith, C. Reporters, news sources, accuracy, and the Yellowstone forest fires. Paper accepted for presentation to the International Communications Association, San Francisco, May 1989.

Smith, C. Flames, firefighters and moonscapes: network television pictures

of the Yellowstone forest fires. Paper accepted for presentation at the Third Annual Visual Communications Conference, Park City, Utah, June 26, 1989.

Smith, C. Brave Firefighters, Endangered National Icons and Bumbling Land Managers: Network TV Myths about the 1988 Yellowstone Wildfires. Paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, D.C., August 13, 1989.

## Potpourri

.....continued from page 11

*identifies in his first paragraph. My suggestion would be that multiple attendees from regional offices or large parks consider undertaking a compilation of the notes on the conference, with the provision that they not expect very much response....."*

John Peine's note: "I wish to commend you [Lenard Brown], Dan Brown, Tom Desjean, and Terry Winschel for the fine job done compiling notes from the subject conference. I found this form of recording of conference proceedings refreshing, in part due to the candid and informal style. A stronger sense of tone and emphasis emerges this way.

"I know this kind of thing can be a thankless job, but it is very useful. I would urge you, if you have not already done so, to forward a copy of your subject notes to the GWS Board of Directors and suggest this be done more formally at the sixth conference."

The combined "Notes on Fifth Triennial Conference of George Wright Society—Tucson, Arizona—November 1988" that accompanied Len Brown's note contains an Introduction which describes the 42+ page volume:

*"In November 1988 the Southeast Regional Office sent a number of employees to the Fifth Triennial Conference of the George Wright Society. The theme of the conference was: Parks and Neighbors—Maintaining Diversity Across Political Boundaries. Four of these employees had backgrounds in cultural resource management. They agreed to take notes during the various sessions attended, compile them in an informal manner, and distribute them to the historical (cultural) parks within Southeast Region.*

*"What follows is the product of their work. In order that the material could reach the field areas as quickly as possible there was no attempt to edit the notes or synthesize them into a single narrative. Where several of the participants attended the same session there will be several sets of notes with some repetition. However, this is balanced by the fact that the several reporters emphasized different portions of the same talk. Supplementing the typed notes are several articles from the Arizona Daily Star and a few handouts from specific sessions.*

*"The material is organized in same order as the sessions took place and the copy of the program serves as the Table of Contents. Hopefully those who receive this material will find it as interesting as those who attended the week long meeting."*

**Potpourri**.....continued on page 38