

CHAPTER 1

Eco-Journalism

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In *The Fading of the Greens* (Bramwell 1994) Anna Bramwell predicted the decline of environmental politics in the industrialised countries of the West. The title of her book could serve as a telling metaphor for the plight of Green journalism as well. If and when the Green movement is in crisis, or even in decline, journalism is affected by this development too. The German Greens are presently going through one of the most difficult times since their beginnings in the 1970s. This may seem a strange statement in view of the fact that they have never held more political power in their short history. They are part of the national, Federal Government in Berlin and they have formed various regional coalition governments together with the Social Democrats, not least in the largest German state of Northrhine-Westphalia. Nevertheless they seem in decline. Results in various regional elections as well as opinion polls tell the same story – stagnation or decline. Some observers think that we may even be seeing the beginning of the end of the Greens as a political force. Not of environmentalism, of course, but of a Green Party able to attract the necessary 5 percent of votes, the hurdle a party in Germany has to overcome if it wants to gain parliamentary seats. Recent election results were not merely frustrating for the Greens, especially in the light of the post-Kohl crisis of the Christian Democrats – the trend which emerged must also worry them deeply: the young voters are turning away. The Greens are losing their appeal especially to the young generation. In the eyes of many young Germans they represent a parent-generation that knows everything better, that has no fun at all, an ageing generation of spoilsports, with whom no one wants to have anything in common. It doesn't help that the Green ministers in the Schröder

Government have not proved to be very competent politicians, apart from Joschka Fischer as Foreign Secretary. Take for example the Minister for the Environment, Jürgen Trittin: he made a complete mess of the core element of Green politics, the phasing out of nuclear energy. He started ill-prepared, had to retreat, and now has to live with a compromise of thirty years, which is far removed from the original Green demand of a speedy farewell to nuclear power. All this of course is reflected in the German press coverage. The Greens no longer have a very good press. Their journalistic sympathisers, once so numerous, have shrunk significantly in number. There is disillusionment on the part of Green supporters, and a lot of gloating amongst those who never really thought highly of the Greens and ecological issues anyway. Environmental journalism in Germany reflects the changing attitudes of society and the changing fortunes of the Green Party. All this stands in sharp contrast to the situation in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the Green Party emerged triumphantly from obscurity.

The First Phase

In the first phase, the environmental movement occupied the moral high ground, and environmental journalism was its important messenger. There was a lot of idealism and conviction around, combined occasionally with a tendency to be self-righteous – only ignorant, greedy forces in society could argue against the frightening extent of environmental degradation, could ignore the escalating destruction and pollution. Global threats like ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect and the destruction of rainforest or temperate forests were the big subjects constantly talked and written about. The peak in environmental concern was reached when even a politician like Margaret Thatcher, influenced by Britain's United Nations Ambassador, Sir Crispin Tickell, delivered a speech in which she postulated that 'mankind had unwittingly and unwillingly endangered the planet'. Al Gore, Vice-President of the United States, published a book on global Green philosophy in the 1990s, and titles like *The End of Nature* (McKibben 1990) made it onto the bestseller lists in most western countries, including Germany. All this indicated how deeply Green ideas had penetrated even sections of the political and economic classes.

This was the time when in the United States mainstream magazines like *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* published title stories about impending global disasters and the *Spectator's* title page showed London landmarks like Big Ben rising out of the sea. *Time Magazine's* personality of the year was Gaia, our planet Earth, whose life

support systems were being eroded and destroyed. Even a magazine like *Business Week* presented to its readers in the financial industries and stock markets a title story about global warming and rising sea levels. One should not forget the enormous impact of the Chernobyl disaster. The near meltdown of the nuclear reactor in the Ukraine caused deep concern all over Europe. Nowhere more, however, than in Germany itself. The intense environmental concern expressed all over the western world strengthened environmental journalism in Germany. Media institutions and journalists who so far had been immune against Green issues reacted to this development. Suddenly it became fashionable to write about issues one would not have touched a few years earlier. Leading lights in the German media scene usually take some of their inspiration from observing the most important, prestigious foreign publications, especially those in the United States and Britain. At the end of the eighties, when global conferences about climate change and ozone depletion mushroomed, environmental journalism in Germany was more *en vogue* than ever before. Even some of the bigshots of German journalism were forced to show some interest – editors or leader article writers of papers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Welt* and *Die Zeit*, who preferred to concentrate on the classic grand topics like foreign politics, the strategic balance, star wars and disarmament – the stuff of thousands of leader articles – decided that they could not abstain from ecological topics any longer. Green topics had until then always been left to younger writers, because they were regarded as a bit soft, if not dubious or cranky. Not any longer.

An amusing example of this sea change concerns my own paper, *Die Zeit*: at the end of 1990 a leader article was published, written by the editor Theo Sommer, a well-known figure on both sides of the Atlantic. In his article he demanded urgent global action to combat the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion – time was running out, his main message ran, governments needed to act. A few months later a young journalist congratulated him on this article. The author seemed slightly embarrassed – he assured his young colleague that it was not really that urgent, that there was plenty of time left to sort things out.

German journalists of the older generation were never part and parcel of the younger, environmentally sensitive scene; they had never shared their hopes and sympathies. Even new scientific evidence and greater political willingness to take action against global environmental threats did not cause a real change of heart in the upper echelons of German journalism; but the overall climate forced even them to pay at least some lipservice to Green issues.

This was the time when Germany's reputation as being environmentally oversensitive, if not hysterical, was born abroad. *Rich, Bothered and Divided* was the telling title of a book about modern Germany, written by David Marsh, an astute observer of my country shortly before unification and the collapse of Communism (Marsh 1989). Even the infamous Chequers conference on German national characteristics held by Margaret Thatcher explicitly minuted the German tendency to be permanently worried, especially about all sorts of environmental dangers and risks. It was environmental journalism which helped create and shape this collective state of ecological concern in Germany.

However, it was not to last. The 1990s, especially the second half of that decade, saw a significant shift in emphasis. Various factors contributed to the decline in the importance of environmental journalism. There is the boredom factor, which should, as far as journalists and their audience are concerned, never be underestimated. A number of journalists found it just boring to swim with the tide and repeat the frequently advanced warnings; they started writing articles which played down if not ridiculed global ecological concerns. Some of them did so purely to be controversial. A well-known reporter from *Der Spiegel* admitted quite openly that he had decided to write against the potential danger of the greenhouse effect because he wanted to be different. He was tired of being just one of many writers warning about global warming or the rapid destruction of rainforests. It is indeed a fact of life in journalism that it often pays to be controversial or to take a different stance. Your voice gets heard more clearly, regardless whether what you say or write is true. However, boredom and cynicism are not the only reasons for the waning of environmental journalism in Germany.

The Green movement and its journalistic sympathisers had to pay the price for too much doom and gloom. There had been an overkill of alarming articles and reports during the first phase of what I call the environmental age. Alarmism was widespread. In Germany the groundwork had been laid by authors like Erhard Eppler, a Social Democrat, who wrote *Ende oder Wende?* (The End or a Turning Point? – Eppler 1975). Another highly influential writer, coming from the other side of the political spectrum, was Herbert Gruhl, until 1974 a Christian Democrat MP, who shattered West Germany's 'Wohlstandsgesellschaft' (affluent society) with his chilling bestseller *Ein Planet wird geplündert. Die Schreckensbilanz unserer Politik* (The Pilfering of the Planet. The Terrible Consequences of Today's Politics – Gruhl 1975). A few years later the mail order publishing house 'Zweitausendeins' sold nearly a million copies of the 'Global 2000 Report to the President' commissioned

by Jimmy Carter (Kaiser 1981). It was a voluminous book of more than a thousand pages, in which every aspect of environmental concern was covered – from overpopulation and shrinking resources to global warming – written by the world’s leading scientists. Books like these, and there were many more, influenced and helped to shape environmental journalism in Germany. Radio and TV stations appointed environmental editors (Redakteure), more air time and space was given to Green topics; *Der Spiegel* alarmed the informed public with a series of dark, threatening title stories, about every possible threat to mankind and nature, not least ‘Waldsterben’ (forest dieback), which triggered special anxiety in the collective consciousness of the Germans. New environmental publications appeared, for instance the magazine *Natur* – not to be confused with the British science magazine. There was also the enormous impact of the report of the Club of Rome (Meadows 1972) with its very precise, and (as we now know) false predictions about the time when resources would be finished if exploitation was to continue at the same pace – oil in 1992, gas in 1993.

This permanent doom and gloom, the prophecies about impending ecological disasters, have in the long run undermined the position of the Green movement and the credibility of environmental journalism. People became wary of what was called the ‘Green religion’. The increased scepticism helped to fuel an anti-Green backlash which was beginning to have an impact. Big multinational companies, the coal and oil industry, not least the battle-hardened chemical industry, made a concerted effort to roll back the environmental movement. They started PR campaigns, they targeted the political and scientific elites successfully. Ecological arguments were turned on their heads, scientific studies financed by institutes set up by big corporations tried to prove that global warming was nothing but a myth. American thinktanks produced a flood of papers which targeted green ‘legends’ and scientists published books with telling titles like *Small is Stupid* (Beckerman 1995) or *Life on a Modern Planet* (North 1995), refuting ecological myths.

Germany Today

In the last decade of the twentieth century environmental issues started playing a much less important role in public consciousness. The priorities of the population changed considerably. It is a well-known phenomenon that if the economic cycle produces a downturn or a recession, the interest in ecological issues recedes. Economic recession causes environmental depression. The change

in question went beyond a mere reaction to less favourable economic circumstances. Nevertheless, despite the priority of economic and social issues and the deep worries about unemployment, Germany is not just returning to the age of pre-environmental innocence or ignorance. Environmental issues have retreated, the media have put them on the back burner, but ecological concerns have not vanished.

Important elements of the Green message have more or less been accepted by the majority, while a significant minority even acts accordingly, tries to use less of the finite resources, to save energy and water, and separates rubbish for recycling. (Even this environmentally aware minority cannot be absolutely sure it is doing the right thing – a report on German Television in 1999 emphasised the negative consequences of lower water use: the pipes are not getting flushed out thoroughly enough any longer.) However, the majority of people, even though they accept the reality of long-term risks for the planet, no longer regard environmental problems as a reason for politicians and governments to act as urgently as possible. Here, it seems, mainstream journalism agrees with its audience: the big stories have all been told, the important environmental problems have all been recognised and analysed. One cannot go on doing this again and again. What is more – the exaggerated prophecies of impending disaster have not materialised. There is also an element of resignation – one can't help it anyhow; the march of progress in combination with the growth of population worldwide can't be stopped. Some of the global ecological damage done is irreversible anyhow, however great it may be.

Added to this are other, even more powerful influences, which shape public and published opinion in Germany – hedonism, materialism and consumerism. Sometimes it is driven by an attitude of 'Nach mir die Sintflut' (*après moi le déluge*). The majority look at the world with a strong optimism, guided by the belief that technological progress will sort out all eco-problems in the long term anyhow, an attitude to be found especially among younger Germans.

For environmental journalism this mix of feelings, emotions and trends has consequences. I have heard from colleagues in a number of papers that it has become much more difficult to find an open ear for Green issues in editorial conferences. Rarely are ecological topics lifted onto the front pages or displayed prominently inside the papers. Lifestyle journalism has replaced Green journalism to quite an extent. 'Jammerartikel' (lamentations) are not popular with editors, because they create 'bad vibes' among the readers and – a very important point in times of falling circulations in Germany's

print media – they are not popular with the advertisers, as I have been told by the head of marketing of a famous German paper.

The readiness of journalists to fight for uncomfortable environmental topics has grown weaker, not only because of the change in the public mood, but also because of another factor. There is a feeling of regret for one's own sins of alarmism. A point in case was the *Brent Spar* incident. The dispute over the planned disposal of the Shell oil platform by dumping it into the North Atlantic triggered a near-hysterical and almost exclusively one-dimensional approach in Germany. Greenpeace played a dubious role in this media drama, feeding false information about the toxic content of the *Brent Spar* to journalists. The facts were not checked, but used to feed the emotions of anger.

Of course alarmism in itself must not necessarily and always be wrong. Things may sometimes be every bit as bad as the alarmist's warning makes them out to be. Anyhow, alarmism may have an important function: it can help raise awareness of problems which undeniably exist. Alarmism can increase sensitivity. However, there is always the danger of creating hysteria, which in turn will lead to the equivalent of cold turkey, disillusionment and cynicism. All too often alarmism has proved to be counterproductive. It has allowed the other side, vested economic interests, to brand everything the alarmists said, including justified and rational warnings, as irrational.

In contemporary Germany environmental journalism does not play as important a role as in the 1980s or before. The overall character of ecological journalism is today neither alarmist nor indifferent, it is somewhere in between. The dominance of the electronic media has changed the character of reporting on environmental topics. Television is picture-driven. It tends to concentrate on disasters and accidents. The print media follow. The coverage of ecological topics today is more event-driven than before; as a consequence one rarely finds an analytical approach or the attempt to put accidents or events into a wider context. Environmental journalism is in this respect afflicted by a general trend which can be observed in the wider media industry. The process of 'dumbing down', which undeniably exists, leaves less space for serious environmental concern in the electronic and print media. There has been a clear shift to a kind of reporting which concentrates on and in most cases vastly exaggerates the dangers for the personal health or life of the viewer/reader. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) was a prime example.

On top of this, the younger generation of journalists does not share the concerns of their peers. Quite often they are highly critical of traditional environmental journalism. They are fascinated by

the rapid progress of modern information technology and draw optimism and belief in progress from this. This tendency is enhanced by an urban or metropolitan lifestyle, quite often far removed from any direct knowledge or experience of the natural environment.

There is another tendency which might become more important in future. Most media outlets have a few journalists who specialise in environmental issues; they are not necessarily part of the science section, which in many cases wants to have the overall say about so-called Green issues, and has managed to achieve this. As a consequence, an interesting gap has opened between environmental and science journalism. The latter is quite often much less worried about potential risks of new technologies and tends to play down or ignore their potential negative impact on the environment. One example is the ongoing dispute on intensive farming methods and the health risks of pesticides and herbicides, another the conflict over the introduction of genetically modified organisms. Science writers tend to believe in the ability of science to deliver progress without negative consequences. They tend to follow the arguments of their scientific peers.

However, science has changed. To quite a degree it has turned into 'corporate science'. Scientific institutions are more than ever before dependent on research grants from business and State institutions. The field of research into genetically modified organisms (GMO research) for example is funded to quite an extent by biotech multinationals like Monsanto. There are few independent scientists left, a fact rarely admitted by ministers. Science journalists, who often have a background in science themselves, wish to be accepted as equals by 'real' scientists. They accept their results more readily and are less willing to question research results whose interpretation may be coloured by the vested interests which financed the research in the first place. The *New Scientist* referred in a recent self-critical article to the 'dominance' of corporate science serving the interests of multinationals. Universities too are losing their independence more and more, because to a growing extent they have to rely on funding from big corporations. Even if governments are really looking for independent expert advice, which is not always the case, they have enormous difficulty finding independent scientists who are not directly or indirectly dependent on the same companies, whose new products, be it GMOs or pesticides, they have to evaluate. One would expect journalists to be aware of this fundamental problem and to act accordingly. However, German science journalists, like most of their colleagues in Britain, rarely live up to this expectation. To illustrate the point, *Der Spiegel* is well known for its tendency to dramatise or occasionally go completely over the top.

Yet not once during the last decade have the science pages of this journal contained an article looking at the possible role of organophosphates (OPs) in various neurological disorders and diseases, like Gulf War syndrome, BSE, or the poisoning of nearly 1000 farmers and farmworkers in Britain after dipping sheep in a cocktail of toxic chemicals. Organophosphates are pesticides based on nerve gas. They have become one of the most successful products of agrobusiness. Against all the odds, there is some hard scientific evidence available indicating that OPs are one factor responsible for the outbreak of BSE in Britain. Despite various research papers published in peer-reviewed journals, coming for instance from the University of Cambridge, no British or German science journalist has taken this up or even reported on it. They have preferred to play it safe, following the guidance of official scientific institutions and government officials. There has been a disappointing lack of cool, detached journalism, trying to investigate glaringly obvious contradictions and shortcomings of the official BSE and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (VCJD) position. Instead the years of the BSE crisis revealed another face of modern journalism: a more short-term, sensationalist approach is affecting the output of all media outlets. There is less room for balanced journalism, for analysis, for seeing and explaining events in a wider context or observing processes instead of going for a crass headline or extraordinary story. The trend has touched even the best of the so-called quality papers and magazines. Environmental stories have changed too, of course. If they make it into print at all, they tend to be sensationalised and hyped, only to miss the real point. Television, the most powerful medium of our age, is driving this process forward. It is the most effective instrument in creating a culture based on consumption and commerce. Its whole existence, one could argue, relies on ever-increasing consumption. The message to be happy and consume does not go well together with warnings about shrinking resources, water scarcity or the dramatic loss of topsoil. Nor are editors over-fond of such warnings who think, or even know, that all too critical articles about oil and life science companies, or too much bad 'mood music', could have an impact on the volume of advertising their paper depends on. As far as documentaries on TV are concerned – they have to be racier and sexier to survive on the main channels – even public broadcasters, drawn into an ever more intense ratings war with their commercial rivals, are giving in to infotainment. This is not a trend peculiar to Germany, far from it. It is more pronounced in Britain or the United States. But it is fast gaining ground around a world in which globalisation and the information revolution have led to a dramatic increase in the volume, intensity and speed of communication and

cultural exchange. At the beginning of the new millenium we are confronted with a strange contradictory situation, in the industrialised world in general, and of course in Germany. Germany is an environmentally more advanced country than most of its neighbours, or so it likes to believe. At the same time the Germans are perhaps even more than others in the grip of material values, dancing around the golden calf of consumerism and luxury consumption. Yet the Green beast is not dead, it is only slumbering. When the global problems become more obvious and action is needed more urgently, it might awake abruptly. Journalists, having known it all along of course, will be its eager supporters.