This is the pre-publication submitted version of the following piece:


This excellent collection of essays brings together a broad range of commentators, including social scientists, environmental scientists, journalists, consultants, NGO campaigners, and politicians. This range of coverage is itself an indication of the complex network of interests and actors involved in the public mediation of scientific research on environmental issues. At the same time, however, the collection is focussed specifically upon the ‘big’ environmental issue of global environmental change. This focus accounts for the recurring framework for analysing the relationships between environmental science and media, which sees an opposition between the long-term perspective required to understand environmental change, and the short-term turnover of ‘news’. In trying to align the different temporal frames of ‘science’ and ‘news’, one of the lessons of the essays in this collection is that ‘news-values’ of novelty and drama are fundamental in shaping how climate change, greenhouse gases, acid rain, and so on become issues of broad public awareness. There is a strong undertone amongst the contributors that this sort of framing lacks seriousness and leads to trivialisation, and that the key challenge is to shift away from a ‘disaster’ frame. The problem with this implication is that it tends to denigrate the very forms of address through which mass media effectively articulate complex issues with the rhythms of everyday life into which news media are woven, and so threaten simply to reproduce a rather linear understanding of the ‘public understanding of science’ in which it is more often than not the media, and indeed the public, that is considered the problem. Indeed, only one chapter deals in detail with how media coverage of environmental issues are actually consumed by ordinary citizens. Global environmental change might not actually be the paradigm case for understanding the relationships between media and environmental science: there is a broader set of recent environmental issues, ‘brown’ as well as ‘green’, from air pollution to GM foods to foot-and-mouth, in which the role of the mass media has been much more contested, serving not simply as a more or less effective conduit for scientific knowledge to the public, but also for the communication of alternative and popular understandings of just what constitutes an environmental risk in the first place (see Allan, Adam, and Carter 2000). In short, what recent environmental scares such as these, ones which touch directly the immediate concerns of ordinary people in the here and now, all suggest is that it might not be the media that is the problem in communicating environmental knowledge which is trusted by the public and can therefore lead to effective changes in policy and conduct. It might be the case that it is the scientists who are the problem, not least in being tied to modes of communication that tend to maintain a sense of authority that increasingly lacks popular legitimacy (see Hargreaves 2000).

A number of the chapters address the changing norms of professional journalism over the last decade and a half in altering the ways in which environmental change is covered in the media, and there is a strong focus upon this being the key to future
An important element of this change is the increasing ‘standing’ ascribed to NGO’s as legitimate sources in the broader news production cycle, and this collection is particularly strong in its attention to the strategies of such organisations in gaining and maintaining media attention. However, while this focus upon journalistic practices and source strategies is a welcome advance on much academic analysis that remains focussed upon mere textual analysis, there is still a tendency to equate ‘the media’ with journalism, and in turn therefore to construct journalists as gatekeepers with a key determining role in shaping what makes the news. This ‘gatekeeping’ model seems attractive, in so far as it points to an important set of power relations, but it tends in fact to obscure the more complex organisational practices within the news media that order and constrain what gets covered and how. The analysis of news media in this book tends to stop with the journalists, and does not delve deeper into the economic and organisational factors that shape news coverage (see Curran 2000).

This collection is, however, an important contribution to debates about science, environment, and media, precisely because it goes much further than most academic discussions in opening up media processes to serious scrutiny by forms of analysis that include, but are not exhausted by, dominant forms of textual analysis.

References