

“E-journalists will benefit from this text aimed at students.”

**Covering the Environment:  
How Journalists Work the Green Beat**

by Robert Wyss

Routledge, 2008, 311 pages, \$39.95  
Reviewed by: Bill Kovarik

*Covering the Environment* is the essential backgrounder about the story of the century.

It is a captivating book with strong insights into the people who are now working the most important job in media history.

Although intended as a textbook for university students, it is valuable for professionals at any level who want to understand this beat. And it might also serve as a thoughtful holiday gift for a difficult editor.

Author Robert Wyss has brought a great deal of his own writing skill to bear from his 35 years as a newspaper reporter, and readers of his book will quickly realize that environmental reporting goes far beyond news and numbers, involving real people working a demanding and frequently thankless job.

The book begins with reporter Mark Schleifstein's struggle to bring serious hurricane coverage to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The stories he wrote in 2002 with John McQuaid, as many SEJ members know, won two Pulitzer Prizes and probably saved tens of thousands of lives in 2005. However, they were written under a cloud of suspicion and at a price of a few serious newsroom arguments. The predicted disaster, with a high loss of life, finally shocked the industry into taking the environmental beat more seriously, Wyss said.

The book also describes Natalie Pawelski reporting from Yellowstone for CNN; Ron Nixon investigating clear-cut logging for the *Roanoke Times*; Ken Ward Jr. of *The Charleston (West Virginia) Gazette* covering a controversy over mining impacts on a school; and Dan Fagin uncovering cancer clusters on Long Island for *Newsday*.

Each of these real world examples is tied to an important thematic lesson. Among the themes are risk communication, understanding science, interviewing scientists, reporters tools and dealing with regulators.

The book gives insights from Christy George of Oregon Public Broadcasting about the value of the first and last questions in interviewing scientists. An example of reporting tools is Jim Bruggers of *The (Louisville) Courier-Journal* discussing computer-assisted reporting in air pollution stories. Another example of long-form narrative is provided by Peter Lord's

*Providence Journal* series about the human side of lead poisoning.

These strong personal narratives make the material come alive. With an admirable internal logic, Wyss' writing itself shows readers an awareness of the human dimensions of any writing work.

The book also notes some of the failings of the press in communicating risk. For instance, in the 1989 controversy over the pesticide Alar, the book notes that author and researcher Sharon Friedman found only a fraction of Alar reporting had used any risk analysis to put the threat into perspective.

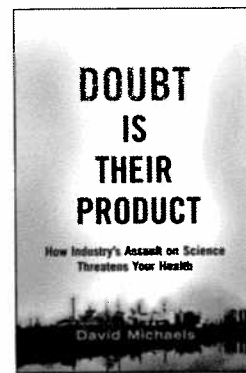
*Covering the Environment* outlines other serious controversies, such as the debate over advocacy versus objectivity and instances when science may have been misrepresented for apparently political reasons. Wyss handles this at arms' length and with insight, but his stance probably won't please everyone.

This is as it should be.

As he writes: “Journalists must determine what is news. They cannot delegate what should be on the public agenda to any one group, be it science, government, or political and environmental advocates.”

Perhaps most memorable is this piece of advice: “Do not be intimidated.”

*Bill Kovarik is a professor of communications at Radford University in Virginia and co-chair of SEJ's 2008 conference.*



“Using politics and science, industry battles regulation.”

**Doubt Is Their Product:  
How Industry's Assault on Science  
Threatens Your Health**

by David Michaels

Oxford University Press, \$27.95  
Reviewed by Jennifer Weeks

News flash (not): Manufacturers of dangerous products fight off regulations by stirring up doubts about what the science really shows.

This theme won't surprise many journalists, or anyone who has watched “A Civil Action” or “Erin Brockovich.”

*Doubt Is Their Product* is an up-close look at what Michaels calls the product defense industry and its tactics.

Recognizing that it's hard to beat something with nothing, the tobacco industry created its own scientific research organizations in the 1950s to cast doubt on studies that showed health risks from smoking. The book's title refers to a 1969 corporate memo that stated, “Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”

Other companies that made asbestos, chromium, synthetic dyes, vinyl chloride, leaded gasoline, and diacetyl (the compound in artificial butter flavoring, which can cause a devastating disease known as popcorn lung), have followed suit.

Many early doubt campaigns were steered by the conservative public relations firm Hill and Knowlton (there's a potential book topic). But since the 1970s the product defense industry has expanded. Michaels describes several consulting firms that specialize in helping manufacturers defend their products against proposed health and safety regulations. They do this, he asserts, by hiring well-trained toxicologists, epidemiologists, statisticians, and other specialists whose work is designed to cloud the debate.

"The scientific studies these firms do for their clients are like the accounting work that some Arthur Anderson company accountants did for Enron (until both companies went bankrupt)," Michaels writes. "They appear to play by the rules of the discipline, but their objective is to help corporations frustrate regulators and prevail in product liability litigation."

It's not easy for journalists or the public to figure out whose science is more credible, but Michaels spotlights some standard product defense methods:

— Re-analyzing raw data from incriminating studies, with subtle changes to the assumptions and methods that reduce estimates of risk and make statistically significant differences smaller.

— Publishing rebuttal studies in industry-funded journals, which appear credible because they are "peer-reviewed" – by sympathetic corporate consultants. As examples, Michaels cites *Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology* (funded by tobacco, chemical, and drug manufacturers) and the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

— Funding policy analysis groups with names like the Council on Water Quality and the Foundation for Clean Air Progress, which make recommendations to Congress and the public that cite industry-funded scientific studies.

Delving further into the doubt industry's methods, Michaels points out some features of misleading public health studies. Since most cancers that are caused by chemical exposures usually take 30 years or more to develop, researchers can make health effects seem minimal by analyzing subjects' exposures over shorter periods. Selecting a small group of subjects makes it harder to show statistically significant increases in disease risks, and mixing subjects with different exposure levels together dilutes what may be high risks for those who receive the heaviest exposures.

The book also shows how corporations have used political strategies to skew the regulatory process. Thanks to laws initiated by cigarette manufacturers, corporations have access to data from federally funded studies that agencies used to write regulations (making it easy for company scientists to reanalyze the data in misleading ways). Under the Data Quality Act, industry can challenge scientific studies issued by government agencies as not meeting proper scientific standards.

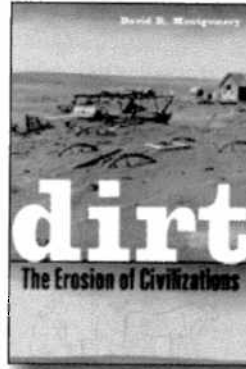
Michaels, who served in the Clinton administration, echoes other critics who argue that President George W. Bush's administration has systematically undercut the role of science in government policy. But he doesn't let Democrats off the hook, although he argues that corporate influence is at an all-time high under Bush.

As one reform, Michaels suggests that corporate executives should be legally responsible for ensuring that the scientific information their firms provide to regulators and the public is accurate (this already applies for financial information, under a 2002 law widely known as Sarbanes-Oxley).

Michaels also recommends a dozen ways to improve the regulatory process. Some are specific, such as requiring full

disclosure of all sponsorship of federally funded scientific studies. Others are broader – for example, unifying control over toxic exposures, which is currently split among EPA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Mining Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). Readers can find supporting materials and news updates on the home page for the Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy at GWU, which Michaels directs ([www.defending-science.org](http://www.defending-science.org)).

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"Everything about dirt,  
but you'll have to dig for it."

## ***Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations***

**by David R. Montgomery**

*University of California, 2007*  
*Reviewed by Susan Moran*

Despite my attempts at gardening, I never fully appreciated worms until I read David R. Montgomery's *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*. Nor did I know how much time and ink Charles Darwin devoted to the squirming creators of soil.

By carefully observing worms in his final years of life, Darwin, Dr. Montgomery writes, discovered and illuminated their role in the buildup of topsoil and thereby "helped open the door for the modern view of soil as the skin of the Earth."

In *Dirt*, the author also explores a profound and problematic truth: ecological suicide is nothing new and that we don't appear to be learning from past mistakes.

The book is chock full of reports on how civilization after civilization has grown, prospered and finally collapsed. In every case the demise was at least in part due to neglect of the soil. In the United States, warnings of destructive agricultural practices date back to founding fathers George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

The problem is, Montgomery's writing is as dry as dirt and as repetitive as sizzling days in Arizona's summers, making it tough to put the many disjointed factual nuggets and flashes of wisdom into a cohesive and useful message. This can't just be blamed on the pressures of academia to produce impenetrable writing. Montgomery is a professor of geomorphology at the University of Washington. But Jared Diamond is also a professor. Montgomery follows thematic currents similar to those in *Diamond's Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, but without the alluring human stories and mind-bending insights. It is unfortunate that such a critical topic, vital to the future of humankind, is treated as an uncoordinated fact dump by Montgomery.