Making Tracks: Pitching the Anthropocene: On Global Media Work and the World to Come

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Making Tracks

In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Dominic Hinde**

From around the age of 15, I think I had wanted to be a journalist, and in the pre-Amazon time before print publishing’s great data-driven reckoning I would go to the branch of the British book chain Waterstones in my local town and buy autobiographies and memoirs by foreign and war correspondents. Foreign correspondents seemed to have the dream job. You got to travel, you didn’t have to wear a suit, and you got to feel as if you were making the world bigger. Thanks to the memoirs I read and the promotional spots 24-hour TV networks used to broadcast between updates and ads, I believed foreign correspondents were a cosmopolitan network of exciting, interesting, and intellectual people and not, as I would go on to find out years later through colleagues and my own work, an often ragtag band with chaotic personal histories who had opted out of normal life in favor of the liberation afforded by permanent transience.

It was far from the only truth I would learn once I started working myself. My first experience of real journalism, including readers’ angry letters, libel, and editorial rows came as news editor and then editor of Edinburgh University’s student newspaper. I interned at the city newspaper in Derby in the English Midlands as well, back then still shifting tens of thousands of copies a day, and did newspaper journalism the old way by going to knock on people’s doors with notebooks. I’d grown up reading the paper on my grandparents’ sofa for the football news and having your name printed in it was a big deal in the family. When I had a front-page I was made to pose for a photo in the living room.

The following summer I worked for a website in Berlin as part of my university year abroad, rewriting wire stories or German media for an expat audience and occasionally filing copy for US regionals. We were sent to cover Barack Obama's visit during the presidential primaries, vox-popping Germans and American tourists about what Obama planned to do about the climate, inequality, and the European project. It gave me my first international bylines and set off my work as a foreign journalist, covering Germany and the Nordics.

I carried on writing through Graduate School, a one-man bureau reporting from Iceland to the Baltics on paper-thin budgets. I went to South America and filed copy on the Zika crisis, and from the US presidential primaries. It was good work in a lot of ways, letting me sit down with refugees, government ministers, writers, and environmental activists and forging networks across the region. If it was properly paid it would have been a dream job, and when I finished my thesis I did it full time for two years, as well as turning my hand to field production, fixing, commentary, and radio as I tried to diversify my income. "Diversifying your income" was one of the things suggested to us on a regular basis so that we could carry on calling ourselves journalists, at a time when anyone with a blog and a twitter account could call themselves one. Of those of us who worked for the commercial press doing hard news, everyone seemed to have a side gig, be it translation, teaching or working for NGOs. For many, the side gig became the main gig with time. An overwhelming amount of foreign correspondence was freelance and media organizations were willing to take full advantage of our expertise without providing us with things as generous as pensions or expenses.

In the mid-2000s the internet had exploded due to a combination of portable hardware and the introduction of participatory and interactive content. In an effort to keep pace with developments, media organizations hired digital native journalists reared on blog writing and headline clicks, whilst senior correspondents saw their wages tumble and their job security disappear. Digital newsrooms recruited hundreds of young journalists (and then promptly sacked them a few years later when the bubble burst), and some journalism scholars uncritically lauded this boom as the triumph of the "digital-first" media, counting clicks in the same way neoclassical economists made GDP graphs as proof of good economic policy.

The problem with good, reflective environmental and social journalism is that it costs money. You need to travel, you need time to think, and you need to consider how to make the invisible visible. I was lucky to the extent that I caught the tail end of the years

of sustainable print journalism, getting my break in foreign work. It gave me a useful perspective on what was underway, and in a roundabout fashion also provided me with a decade of anthropological fieldwork notes and sober realism about the state of things. I began to find journalistic work not just challenging, but increasingly depressing in its refusal to see where it was failing both journalists and the public.

From about 2012 onwards the Anthropocene had started to make waves in academic circles and soon people in academia and the press were kicking out copy with Anthropocene in the title. It had become an ersatz term for environmental crisis, existential dread, or whatever was going on in the world at that time, and this tendency soon filtered through to the mainstream press. Anthropocene was a word bandied about as a catchy neologism in the same breath as blockchain, big data, and biohacking. I attended a conference in Iceland as press, in which people treated it as hook to push Arctic shipping routes and half-baked visions of a future mineral economy for Greenland.

In 2015 I was up a hill in the Swedish Arctic, overlooking the huge company mining town of Kiruna. Down the road, the world-famous ice hotel was melting and the mineral railway was being upgraded so it could stay competitive, shipping 10 trains a day to Norway for export to build skyscrapers in the desert in Dubai. On the ski slopes where I was standing, they had started using snow machines to compensate for the temperature fluctuations. It got me thinking about what that story would look like if I was allowed to tell it properly. There were so many angles and so much material, it was a perfect Anthropocene frame. In the end, I wrote two versions of the story; one was commercial for the US market and said almost nothing useful, the other ended up unpaid on a blog.

I went back to Scotland and defended my thesis on the environment in the Swedish media, and thought about what to do next. Journalism was what I loved but academia was what I was qualified to do, so tentatively I sketched out a project with the zeitgeisty title “Journalism in the Anthropocene” and was squeezed into an overflow panel at that year’s Royal Geographical Society conference. There were six people in the room, none of whom seemed hugely interested, but it gave me a platform to start working on the project alongside my journalistic work. The conference presentation became a project proposal, which turned into a postdoc fellowship in Edinburgh and then a position as a media lecturer at Queen Margaret University on the edge of the city, and a book proposal to develop a short introduction to Anthropocene journalism. Then came the chance to come back to Germany, where my career really began, and begin to work on the book at the Rachel Carson Center.

The journalism scholar Sarah Niblock says that sometimes “you are the data.” This doesn’t mean doing what so many veteran journalists do, delivering elegies to the news industry to journalism students with vague aspirations for the emergence of a disciplinary renewal, but rather being reflexive about what you are doing and how. For me, media study is an ethnographic undertaking in terms of both its producers and its consumers. It is also an ontological project. Counting tweets and impact is meaningless without a consideration of the core questions of how journalism fits into whatever the world is becoming. And this is where the Anthropocene problematique comes in; this moment, when modernity begins to come unstuck, began to make a lot more sense. My academic work allowed me to re-engage with many of my own experiences in a way that finally gave them some meaning.

Journalism and media studies are useless if it does not try to contribute to the future of journalism, but then journalism as we knew it is dead, and so is the pre-Anthropocene world. Eschatology, of both media practice and the world it seeks to describe, seems the only honest course to take.