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## **Dealing with the Green New Deal**

Marla Dickerson of the *Los Angeles Times* got the quote.

“This is like the era of Henry Ford” mechanical engineer Rich Steudemann told Dickerson for her Jan. 4 *Times* story, “Clean energy already jolting job markets; States see the thriving green sector as their future. Even Michigan.” Steudemann's statement, as told by Dickerson, might have been just what Barack Obama's incoming presidential administration would hope for weeks before his inauguration. As closure for her article, Dickerson positioned the incoming presidency and what was then a proposed stimulus package as the newest chapter in the long story of Michigan's, and America's, industrial history. Could jobs in clean technology and alternative energy lead the nation out of economic turmoil? Could the creation of a “Green New Deal” offer a 21<sup>st</sup> century reinvention of America?

Whether or not a Green New Deal was possible, environmental journalists, business reporters, science writers and political correspondents alike faced a daunting challenge over the past year: how to cover the evolution of a movement that another year earlier may have seemed an issue on the fringe of the fringe. Now that an economic stimulus package has been passed and a budget has been signed, the question has become how much green — in terms of the environmental future — has Obama and Congress left in the deal?

Journalists who want to tell stories about Green New Deals or clean technology or

alternative energy need to be able to explain how these deals are both “new” and “green.”

Otherwise, they don't offer any valuable insight for readers. So when Kate Galbraith, writing for the *New York Times*' “Green Inc.” blog reported Feb. 17 on the signing of the Federal Stimulus package and claimed that “the clean energy industry — among the biggest winners — are celebrating ” she needed to spell out who was popping corks.

She did. Sort of.

Galbraith noted generally how the stimulus money would be allocated to different sectors tied to the “clean energy industry,” but the reporter, who joined the *Times* in mid-2008 to write about the renewable energy industry, didn't provide any context about how renewable or not each area of focus really is. In essence, she declared the “clean energy” industry winners, but she didn't describe who they were or why they had won.

One might argue she didn't need to, that, writing a quick blog post, she was simply summarizing one angle of news that was covered extensively elsewhere. Yet for all the blogrolls in the post's sidebar and the vast resources of the *Times* at her — and by extension, her readers' — fingertips, there is not one hyperlink to the paper's coverage of the stimulus bill's signing. Thus, there's no contextualization of this news, no placement of it in the broader story of the economic crisis and responses to it. This does a disservice to readers who read “Green Inc.,” especially if they peruse the blog interested in the mission described in its “About Green Inc.” section:

“How will the pressures of climate change, limited fossil fuel resources and the mainstreaming of “green” consciousness reshape society? Follow the money. From

renewable energy policy to carbon markets to dubious eco-advertising, our energy and environment reporters track the high-stakes pursuit of a greener globe.”

Galbraith didn't follow the money. She didn't describe how society was being reshaped.

In a space that should be a specialist's playground, a blog with a well-articulated, focused area of expertise, Galbraith does little more than regurgitate a press release summarizing the stimulus. She even links readers to the press release she's referencing, but, again, not to her own paper's coverage. This, at one of the more crucial moments in the evolution of a Green New Deal.

Galbraith's shallow reporting contrasts sharply with Dickerson, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who described the possibility of a green collar economy three weeks before Obama's inauguration. Unlike Galbraith, Dickerson was able to both summarize details of Obama's evolving Green New Deal, position the story in a longer timeline, and describe who might be “in the room” for some of the decisions affecting it. She effectively transitioned between the microscale of blue collar workers in Michigan learning green technology to the macro scale of Obama's \$150 billion plans for a green economy. Dickerson doesn't just describe optimistic former autoworkers: she details the evolution of “green collar” jobs and their place in a longer, broader economic story.

“America has heard it before,” Dickerson notes with insight. “Every president since Richard Nixon has touted energy independence, yet the goal remains elusive. The U.S. imported less than a third of its crude around the time of the Arab oil embargo in 1973. Today foreigners feed nearly 60% of the nation's petroleum habit.”

The skepticism Dickerson describes isn't just based in history. She also notes criticism of corn-based ethanol subsidies, evolving solar technology, and the impact of collapsing energy and financial markets in 2008 on keeping renewable energy technologies competitive. She also briefly offers some of the more detailed descriptions of solar and wind manufacturing, as well as weatherizing for energy efficiency that exists in the coverage of the Green New Deal. Finally, she brings key players with a seat at Obama's table into her discussion, such as Van Jones, who at the time was an Oakland-based activist and went on to join Obama's Council on Environmental Quality.

Of course, stories of a Green New Deal couldn't just situate the topic in American economic and political history. Such a deal wasn't just in the works for the United States. As Obama prepared for the presidency, other nations were preparing their own Green New Deals, and the term had been adopted by the United Nations. In the Fall and Winter of 2008, International media widely reported the preparation of a report outlining the possibility of economic stimulus packages across the globe focused on energy efficiency and reduction of climate impacts. Most focused on stenographic descriptions of multinational climate change conferences and the pronouncements of Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and other international officials. At least one, a dispatch by Stefan Nicola for *United Press International* took a different approach.

Nicola took the occasion of a climate conference in Poznan, Poland, to analyze the possibility of a Green New Deal for the United States. His position outside the United States allowed him to situate the incoming administration's planning within the broader global story of

climate change and the international economy, noting, as many participants in the conference did, the irony that a Green New Deal was being “floated in the country that has hampered further progress on climate protection in recent years — the United States.” What Nicola accomplished that most American reporters covering the presidential transition did not was highlight how important the international community saw the possibility of changing leadership. He did so powerfully by quoting the prime minister of Tuvalu, which Nicola described as a “small Pacific island-state facing extinction from rising seas.”

In November and December, as the Poznan conference was taking shape, American reporters were busily describing the formation of Obama's cabinet and his solidifying plans for the economy. Among them was Beth Daley, whose *Boston Globe* story “Obama urged to create a Green New Deal” (interestingly placed in the paper's health and science section, not with political or business coverage) situated such a package as part of a global response to a slower economy. Aware of the upcoming conference, Daley described some of the specifics forming around Obama's plans and introduced a number of organizations urging a Green New Deal. At the time, it appeared solar and wind energy, as well as energy efficiency would be the centerpiece of such a package, but some journalists mining beneath the surface of a Green New Deal were approaching a darker vein.

“The future of coal will dictate the future of the climate,” wrote Bryan Walsh in the second paragraph of his *Time* magazine feature “Taking on King Coal.” Walsh described the fight launching between environmentalists and coal industry backers who argued that clean coal was the solution. Toward the end of his story Walsh notes the amorphous definition of “clean” when

it comes to coal. He describes how the term “can refer to new technologies that remove pollutants like soot and sulfur dioxide from the waste process, or it can mean capturing and sequestering the carbon burned in coal.”

This discussion of coal becomes significant when examining the final stimulus package and the players involved in shaping it.

When it comes to who was in the room, at least one journalist got it, and one doesn't have to go further than the lede to see why. “Deep inside the economic stimulus package is a \$1 billion prize that, in five short words, shows the benefits of being in power in Washington,” wrote Kimberly Kindy in her March 9 *Washington Post* article “New Life for 'Clean Coal' Project.”

The piece is packed with insight contextualizing the resurrection of plans for assistance to a power plant based in Southern Illinois. It notes how the plant, known as FutureGen, and whose federal support was halted by the Bush Administration, was backed by Illinois politicians including Obama, Chief-of-Staff Rahm Emanuel, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, and Senator and Majority Whip Dick Durbin.

While Kindy's article spins a great dot-connecting political yarn, it doesn't significantly address any of the science of new coal power technologies or the serious environmental concerns that such examinations raise. The only exception is a small note in which the author notes that the proposed Illinois site sits above “a natural sandstone formation that could serve as an ideal trap to keep carbon dioxide emissions stored underground.” There is little description of what makes the site ideal, why the carbon emissions should be stored underground, or what is wrong with carbon emissions. Granted, it's a political story, so the science doesn't have to be overt, but

then why mention it at all? Because if “clean coal” and not simply, coal, is the subject of discussion, we need some explanation of why the differentiation is made.

In fact, Kindy gets the general science *wrong*, when she writes that the proposed plant would sequester emissions underground “Instead of releasing the resulting carbon dioxide emissions into the air as *pollution* [emphasis mine].”

The problem with carbon emissions isn't “pollution,” (there are other pollutants that are part of the problem however); instead, the concern is global warming. The differentiation is crucial. Pollution is generally a local impact. Warming has worldwide, often non-local, implications. This distinction may seem trifling, but it matters when talking about why this is a national and global concern, and at this point any reporter covering the environment should understand the difference

Back at the *New York Times*, reporter Matthew Wald does a better job both of contextualizing the allocation of funds in the stimulus package and explaining the scientific uncertainties of “clean coal.” His March 16 article, “Stimulus Money Puts Clean Coal Projects on a Faster Track” details carbon sequestration projects similar to FutureGen, but only gives brief play to environmentalists' opposition to carbon sequestration research. Interestingly, though, Wald comes to different conclusions than Kindy about FutureGen, implying that the project is much less likely than a coal project underway in Indiana. Interestingly, though, while Wald gets the science right, he completely overlooks the political influence Kindy noted that secured more than \$1 billion for the FutureGen project.

Together, these stories all suggest to me the complexities of covering decisions about revamping the nation's infrastructure. Few seem to provide the insight necessary to ask deeper

questions of why some projects favored in the evolving Green New Deal are given precedence over others. Many reporters seem to understand the economic implications if the green energy gamble pays off, but rarely do reporters deeply examine the science behind which aspects of that gamble are truly green and which are merely greenwashing. Without such examinations, the public has few resources to determine whether politicians are making sound decisions for their tax dollars or who may be influencing the discussion.