

The author, an environmental reporter who covered the Yellowstone Fires of 1988 for the Idaho Falls Post Register, explores the evolution of news coverage—in particular, television news—of wildfires and the wildland-urban interface since those fires. Although the images projected on screen may not have changed much in twenty years, the quality and depth of reporting have.

SCORCHED TRUTH

CHANGING NEWS VALUES ON WILDFIRES

On September 7, 1988, forest fire was the biggest news story of the day. Fire was burning all around the iconic Old Faithful geyser and endangering a national historic landmark, the Old Faithful Inn. The forest fire story had been building since late July in Yellowstone National Park and

now it was reaching a crescendo.

Coverage of the Yellowstone fires was the beginning of a new generation of reporting on forest fires. Reporters and news producers did not know much about fires or forest science in 1988. But by 2007, fire coverage in America had gone through a transition that began at Old Faithful that late summer day.

Not since the Big Blowup of 1910 had firefighters even seen the kind of wild behavior Yellowstone's fires had already shown that summer. On August 20, 1988—seventy-eight years later to the day since the Big Blowup—165,000 acres in Yellowstone burned on what became known as “Black Saturday”; *Denver Post* reporter Jim Carrier said the park looked from the air like it had been under nuclear attack.

Cable News Network (CNN) was coming into its own that summer and was running videotape of raging fires all day long. On September 7, when firefighters decided they could no longer hold the line west of Old Faithful, journalists flocked to the scene, stationing their satellite trucks in the huge parking lot in front of Old Faithful Inn. As the fire crested the hills to the west with flames two hundred feet high, the television trucks were beam-

ing the dramatic images live for the evening news broadcasts. At that moment anchorman Tom Brokaw, who coincidentally owned a ranch downwind of the park, was beginning the *NBC Nightly News* broadcast.

“Old Faithful at Yellowstone, one of the most popular tourist attractions in our oldest national park, is under siege tonight,” Brokaw began. “There are a lot of angry people who believe that the National Park Service is responsible and has let the fires burn too freely for too long.”¹ He did not say whether he was among them.

The broadcast then cut to the videotape of huge fires that burned throughout Yellowstone that day; the North Fork fire that threatened Old Faithful burned more than 56,000 acres on September 7, though it spared the Park Service's most famous icon. Yet the crown jewel in the National Park System looked tarnished beyond recognition to millions of television viewers. In the end, when the fires were extinguished by snowfall in November, slightly less than 1 million acres—nearly forty-five percent of the park's 2.2 million acres—inside Yellowstone Park and 567,000 acres in the five surrounding national forests had burned.

BY ROCKY BARKER

Starting with the Yellowstone Fires of 1988, television news imprinted these iconic images of fighting wildfires on the public's collective consciousness: clockwise from left to right, a fire-fighter spraying water on a structure (Old Faithful Inn); fire crews clad in yellow walking in line; and an airplane dropping liquid retardant.

"This is what's left of Yellowstone tonight," Brokaw said. "No one argues that it will take decades to fix, but already the process has started."

Then Brokaw went to the Old Faithful parking lot and correspondent Roger O'Neil.

"Tom, that North Fork fire has been making a strong march toward Old Faithful since noon, and it got considerably stronger in the last half hour," reported O'Neil. "We now have fifty- to sixty-mile-an-hour winds here, and the fire is less than two blocks from the inn. There is one way out—fire is on three sides."²

The reporting that day—and all that summer—was the public's first real introduction to forest fires and federal fire policy beyond the Smokey Bear commercials and advertisements that had bombarded them for four decades. Those ads, considered by many advertising historians among the most effective ever, had taught Americans that fire was bad and firefighting was a noble cause.

BURNING YELLOWSTONE TO SAVE IT

Beginning in the 1940s, some in the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and elsewhere began to recognize the importance and value of fire as an ecological disturbance on the landscape. Slowly that argument gained acceptance within the federal agencies. In 1968, the National Park Service enacted a let-burn policy for the first time, and other agencies soon followed suit.³ Twenty years later, when the Yellowstone fires began in June, the park's scientists and public information staff saw a great opportunity to educate the public about the value of fire. But as the fires grew into firestorms and blew out of control, park officials backed off the message. Americans, conditioned by Smokey Bear, were not buying it. It was like the U.S. soldier in Vietnam who told reporters that in order to save a village he had to destroy it. Americans viewed Yellowstone through the camera's eye and considered it destroyed.

In 1992, Conrad Smith, then an assistant professor of journalism at Ohio State University, published what became the basic study of journalism's coverage of forest fires.⁴ Smith found that the media's coverage of the disaster was often inaccurate and ignored the scientific story of fire's role in the ecosystem.

But after the fires were extinguished six months after they first started, park officials were able to attract reporters and writers back to the park to tell the restoration story. Magazines like *National Geographic* and *Audubon* highlighted the return of vegetation and the natural reseeding of trees because the fires had



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE. PHOTO NUMBER 12691. PHOTO BY JIM PEACOCK

opened up the cones of lodgepole pines.

Yellowstone's 1988 blazes were the signal fires of the big fires to come. The subject returned to the national news in 1991 when forest fires raged into the neighborhoods of northern Oakland, California. It came again in 1992 as hundreds of thousands of acres burned across the Boise National Forest. The following year, Malibu burned and the story began to move away from "burn versus let-burn" to what fire managers called the wildland-urban interface.

With each of these fires, television cameras were once again bringing images of conflagration into America's living rooms. But now the press was becoming more sophisticated about its reporting of the fires.

As always, the news reports were dominated by reports from the front. They showed yellow-shirted firefighters marching up steep mountains to dig fire lines, air tankers dropping magenta retardant on raging crown fires, fearful homeowners evacuating



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, PHOTO NUMBER 12789, PHOTO BY JEFF HENRY



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, PHOTO NUMBER 12502, PHOTO BY JEFF HENRY



After the fire story ended, the story changed to one of restoration. Park officials invited reporters back after the fires were extinguished to bear witness to the recovery already underway—in this case, larkspur growing in Yellowstone in 1988.

or preparing to fight the disaster themselves.

But now the networks and national newspapers were sending their reporters back to Yellowstone as a part of the second- and third-day stories of the fires. The cameras showed flames and firefighters in one segment but then returned viewers to Yellowstone, where nature's recuperative power was the theme. The fire story was no longer dominated by Smokey Bear. It had depth. It soon had meaning.

RETHINKING REPORTING

In his book *Young Men and Fire* (1992), author Norman Maclean wrote about the deaths of thirteen firefighters in the 1949 Mann Gulch fire in Montana. Two years after that popular book came

out, fourteen firefighters were killed in a remarkably similar situation at Storm King Mountain near Glenwood Springs, Colorado. The two fires, though occurring forty-five years apart, together triggered a national debate about the rationale of sending firefighters to fight fires in largely unoccupied wildlands, especially when the fire was ecologically beneficial. The media, no longer in a catch-up mode, now was covering the many debates within the fire community as they emerged. In some cases the media were driving the debate. When fire from a controlled burn near Los Alamos got out of control and consumed hundreds of homes in 2000, newspapers were doing their own investigations of fires and running sophisticated graphics showing people how they could bring a house to firewise standards.⁵

With huge fires now an annual occurrence, news coverage has evolved even further. In 2003 and 2007, blazes in southern California brought both in-depth local fire coverage and national focus. The *Los Angeles Times* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for its fire coverage, and all three networks sent their anchors to California to cover the fires in 2007. With time to fill in the twenty-four-hour news cycle, in addition to reporting on a fire's day-to-day status, the cable news networks frequently interview fire ecologists and researchers as well as environmental historians. In 2007, *60 Minutes* ran a feature on the increasing intensity and frequency of western forest fires and their effect on the landscape.

Fire no longer was a one-dimensional breaking news story. Environmental reporters, now a separate specialty among journalists, were reporting the breaking disaster story, along with the science story, the federal budget issues story, and even the cultural history—all the elements that make the fire story such a rich one. And though the video footage and still images look virtually the same as in 1988—airial attacks on the fire, marching firefighters, scorched home sites—there now is substance and informed reporting to go with them. □

Rocky Barker is an environmental journalist for the Idaho Statesman and the author of Scorched Earth: How the Fires in Yellowstone Changed America and Saving All the Parts: Reconciling Economics and the Endangered Species Act, both from Island Press.

NOTES

1. NBC News staff, *NBC Nightly News* transcript, September 7, 1988. From the University of Wyoming library; and Hal K. Rothman, *Blazing Heritage: A History of Wildland Fire in the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164–65. Rothman's history includes a full chapter on the Yellowstone fires.
2. *NBC Nightly News* transcript.
3. Rothman, *Blazing Heritage*, 101–04.
4. Conrad Smith, *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992).
5. Patrick O'Driscoll and Tom Kenworthy, "The Los Alamos Fire, repeats waiting to happen all over the West," *USA Today*, May 15, 2000.