

## The work of the media in whale strandings

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86-1

### Abstract

The stranding of sperm whales at the Belgian coast in November 1994 attracted the general attention of the media. Excessive shows of passion often encountered in other parts of the world when cetaceans die were not observed. An examination of the articles which appeared in the press shows that the event was merely treated as a major, but common news item. Priority was given to the daily developments. The work of the authorities and that of the scientists were given similar status as the anecdotic aspects. The importance given to controversies regarding the management of the situation must be stressed. The media did not go deeply into the biology of sperm whales, the strandings that occurred abroad, or the various hypotheses that were discussed. How could such a superficial approach be explained? Would the content of the press reports have been different if official statements had regularly been released during the operation? The paper goes into the role of journalists, the strategy of interaction with the media during spectacular events, and the attention environmental matters receive in the media.

**Keywords:** sperm whale, stranding, media, press, environment.

### Résumé

L'échouage de cachalots à la côte belge en novembre 1994 fut l'objet d'une attention générale des médias. Les excès passionnels souvent observés sous d'autres latitudes lors de pertes de cétacés ne furent pas de mise. L'analyse des articles publiés montre que cet événement fut avant tout traité comme un fait divers majeur. La priorité fut donnée à l'actualité au jour le jour, le travail des autorités et des scientifiques étant mis sur le même pied que les aspects anecdotiques. Il faut souligner la place réservée aux polémiques quant à la gestion de la situation. La presse n'a traité en profondeur ni de la biologie des cachalots, ni des autres échouages survenus à l'étranger, ni des hypothèses en jeu. Comment expliquer cette approche superficielle? Quel aurait été le contenu des reportages si des communiqués officiels avaient été lancés régulièrement pendant l'opération? L'article aborde le rôle des journalistes, la stratégie de l'interaction avec les médias lors d'événements spectaculaires et l'attention que les matières environnementales reçoivent dans les médias.

**Mots-clés:** cachalot, échouage, médias, presse, environnement.

We have a precise recollection of circumstances in which we hear a piece of news that affects us deeply. Most people can say exactly where they were and what they were doing when they learned of the assassination of JFK, when they saw Man taking his first steps on

the Moon and, for a Belgian, when he saw Eddy Merckx's first victory in the Tour de France. This is certainly also the case for the stranding of the four sperm whales that brought us together for these two days in November 1994.

Journalists have a different approach to things. For them, the exceptional event has become the routine. Day after day they form the interface between a huge panoply of current events and the public seeking information. There is obviously an element of the tragic or exceptional in these current events. There are indeed so many of these that a choice has to be made. The mechanisms involved in this choice are familiar. The main criterion is that of death per kilometre. It is clear which news item – a railway accident that kills 500 people in India or a crime of passion committed in the suburb of Charleroi or Hasselt – will be of greater interest to the Belgian public.

The media quickly descended on the scene at Koksijde on 18 November, 1994, because they perceived the importance of the event. The criterion of proximity is an obvious one. Every Belgian, even at the most distant point of the country at Arlon, is well-acquainted with some part of the coast. And people have an emotional attachment to cetaceans. There are records of whale songs, their skeletons are fairground attractions and children have cuddly whale toys. The increased awareness created by environmental movements has now given the fate of whales a cultural dimension. In the past, the media have already given us proof of a keen interest in cetaceans. Remember how excited the Americans were about the fate of gray whales trapped by ice floes? Hollywood learnt the lesson from those three whales and later cashed in with the film *Free Willy*.

How did the media go to work on 18 November and over the next few days? Above all, how were they informed? There are several ways of getting tipped off about an event. Journalists who keep track of local news telephone the switchboard of the 100 service (equivalent to dialling "999" in the U.K.) several times a day at various police stations. Here on the coast, journalists telephone the pilotage services at Ostend daily. Over

the course of time, relationships build up and it often happens that officers in the emergency services or the forces of law and order inform journalists with whom they are on good terms. And then, to be sure of not missing anything, some local newsdesks equip themselves with scanners and listen in on police communications continuously. Local correspondents inform regional or national newsdesks. They confer over how to cover the event. Finally newsdesks which had not been alerted will be kept informed very quickly through the Belga news agency. The trusty old telexes spilling out reams of paper have disappeared. Urgent news items flash up on computer screens. In some systems there is even an audible signal which prompts the user to go and read what is just arriving in the computer. I personally was informed by telephone at 10 a.m. by one of the authorities called to the scene.

How did the journalists go to work at Koksijde once they had arrived on the scene? The media must act as our eyes and ears. A journalist observes the situation, looks for people to talk to in order to get the facts, asks questions and interviews witnesses. This documentation work is of increasing complexity depending on the medium concerned. There are many differences between the work of a journalist in the printed press, who moves around with a ball-point pen and a notebook, and the work of a television crew of several persons carrying dozens of kilos of equipment on their shoulders. This is something that often is forgotten when activities are organised for the press. If a site is being visited, for example, journalists from the printed press have already clambered back onto the bus while the television crew is still setting up its cameras. The cameras still have to be positioned and the colours adjusted before filming. This means that the diversity and density of the information received over a given period of time is in inverse proportion to the complexity of the equipment used. There are very specific deadlines over a given period of time. Journalists are people in a hurry. An RTBF (Belgian public service TV) crew working for the 7.30 p. m. news programme should ideally be in the editing room in Brussels by 7 p. m. for them to be possible to edit and add a soundtrack to the story in good conditions. The same deadline applies to the photographer, who has to develop his films, and to the press journalist who has to edit his article on a word processor. The deadline is even shorter for the radio journalist, who has to install a magnetic tape and edit a short item for the main 1 p. m. or 6 p. m. news.

Let us look at the result of this work amounting to a maximum of a few hours. It is the printed press that represents the least cumbersome medium, i.e. is most likely to gather the most information on the scene and use the testimony of people who are not on the scene (experts who are contacted by telephone, for example). The printed press is also the medium best placed, in terms of deadlines, to consult the documentary sources of information.

It must be said that things are not always so clear-cut. Approximations and even errors are common in the Saturday morning newspapers. On the first day there is talk of five sperm whales. A fifth sperm whale is stranded between De Haan and Wenduine. It measures 17 m and weighs 55 tonnes. According to another newspaper it is a porpoise that has become stranded at De Haan. According to yet another, the fourth sperm whale is not towed to Lombardsijde: it is stranded close to the other three. A whole club could have been set up to accommodate all the sperm-whale discoverers. A whole host of different people claim to have been the first to see the cetaceans. An article going into encyclopaedic detail about sperm whales states that these cetaceans live for 125 years. What are sperm whales, why have they become stranded, what will happen? Few details are given. From this first day there is information of a more anecdotal nature. There is talk of traffic jams caused by the influx of sightseers and of good business for merchants on the coast who have opened bars and tea-rooms.

No newspapers come out on Sunday. What do we read on Monday morning? No background information. No summary article on the biology of sperm whales, no theories on the causes of strandings, no comparisons with similar phenomena to put this incident into perspective. The operations that were carried out over the weekend are reported in particular: the necropsy performed during the night from Friday to Saturday, the huge influx of curious onlookers over the weekend. The approach is very much that of a major item in the "other news". There are again many anecdotal stories: people have to park their cars three kilometres away, a gendarme has lost his hand gun in the sand, the hawkers are there selling T-shirts, a doughnut seller has been unable to set up his stall on the sea wall, and so on.

A great change has taken place in the Tuesday morning press. The carving-up of sperm-whale carcasses is reported, the tone above all has become polemical, on two points. Firstly the problem of the skeleton. Information had circulated to the effect that a skeleton was to be kept for tourist purposes. This has not been done and people are unhappy. Secondly there is visible discomfort due the polemical statements in the press over the way in which the scientists carried out the necropsies. This is reflected in nervousness on the scene. The press, as always in these cases, talks of the measures taken against it in fulfilling its task of gathering information.

And then nothing more. The sperm whales are no longer there. The world carries on spinning and current events offer other exceptional subjects. The page has been turned. As always. When the Braer oil tanker ran aground in Shetland in January 1993, there was no longer sufficient space on the airport roof for the satellite dishes of the television crews who had arrived from all over the world. Most of these dishes had already been deployed on the scene of other disasters when the tanker broke in two, seven days later.

Information shows its limits every day. I would like to take another example relating to mammals in the North Sea to illustrate the degree to which these limits can be frustrating. This relates to the huge death rates among seals at the end of the 1980s. The newspaper "Le Soir" mentioned the deaths of seals on 17 occasions between June 1988 and January 1989. Nine of these articles had been published during the month of August 1988, at a time when the facts were flooding in. These 17 episodes can be broken down as follows:

- 1 photograph with caption,
- 6 small news items (summaries of agency news reports),
- 1 small news item to correct a misprint in a figure,
- 2 short Agence France Presse (AFP) articles,
- 4 AFP articles,
- 3 articles by MARC METDEPENNINGEN.

The whole of this information has a disjointed nature. The small news items are principally limited to mortality statistics and even those coming from the same agency are sometimes contradictory: 12,000 deaths or two-thirds of the stock on 8 September, 17,000 deaths or still two-thirds of the stock on 12 October, the same number of countries is not always taken into account, and so on. All the articles mention only the current news except for one AFP article (beginning of August) which summarises facts and opinions at the start of the wave of deaths. In the absence of editorial coordination, the reader, who has already been informed in a piecemeal way, will not even have known how the story finished: no article was concerned with the true nature of the virus, the research work carried out to explain the ravage caused, the steps taken to allow seal populations to become re-established and so on. Would it not have been interesting for a journalistic contribution by the editorial staff themselves to inform the reader about the different species of seal living along European coasts (one species in particular was affected by the epidemic and not simply "seals" as was always stated), a brief account of their life style and their appearance along our beaches, information about threats (previous epidemics, problems related to fishing, pollution, yachting and so on) which have an impact on their populations? As the ravages caused by the epidemic were explained through a lowering of the immune defences of the seals following water pollution by PCBs in particular, would a summing-up of the situation in the North Sea from this point of view not have been of interest?

One of the major reasons for this situation is the economic crisis being experienced by the press. Production costs have to be reduced. As some costs, particularly that of newsprint, are rising, there is very heavy pressure on productivity in editorial departments. The crude publishing of information from international press agencies is on the increase. A smaller number of journalists have to write more articles. They therefore

have less time to obtain and check information, carry out their analyses, search for documentation and meet informants.

How can the quality of information be improved? Apart from the economic aspects, journalists can be helped by building up a dialogue with them which will enable them to carry out their work as well as possible under the constraints they face. With regard to the sperm whales, the essentially anecdotal or even polemical nature of the articles shows that journalists were very limited in their work on the spot. It should not be forgotten that journalists who cover this type of event are "jack-of-all-trades" who move from a students' strike to a motorway accident, covering a sperm-whale stranding in between. What would the articles contain if someone with knowledge had been appointed to inform the press on the beach at Koksijde? If briefing centres for the press had been regularly organised? Accurate information could thus have been given concerning the necropsy procedure, in its European context, theories could have been put forward and the emphasis could have been put on the international aspect of the problem. The need for statements from scientific experts could have been met. It would also have been possible to distribute general documentation. All these objectives were met by a press conference given at the end of December but it is at the time when the story was hot that basic information would have been most useful.

All this argues for implementation of a policy to take account of the press when an event of this importance occurs. It might be thought that, in relation to the urgency of the situation, the press is a secondary consideration. This would be a mistake because everyone here works in the environmental sector. This is a sector which will only progress if the public continues to be made aware of the problems that need to be solved. The press is an essential interface in this respect. It is as such that it must be regarded, and not just as one more problem that the authorities have to deal with at the site of a disaster.

With regard to the events in the North Sea, the action to be taken by the authorities or scientists is planned. Why not incorporate the aspects of contact with the press into these plans? The influx of journalists and the competition between them to cover the best aspects of the incident at all costs must in any case be managed. It might as well be done in a positive way. Taking account of the "going to bed" deadlines of newspapers and offering opportunities and access to take pictures (taking account of the specific features of the media for this purpose), offering reception facilities (premises, electricity, telephone lines, sandwiches etc.) and above all appointing a liaison whose principal function will be dialogue with journalists, a frank dialogue, free from clichés. This policy of dialogue should not be reserved for crisis situations. Some companies and institutions, for example, do develop a policy of continuous contact with the media.

Regular distribution of information on current issues can only increase the amount of information on wildlife and the environment in the North Sea in the media. If this information is not routinely found in the newspapers, it will nevertheless have the effect of gradually increasing knowledge in the press of the problems associated with the North Sea. It is also a way of getting to know journalists better and getting to be known better by journalists. This opening-up process is all the more important as the

amount of space dedicated to the environment in the media is currently in decline.

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