

## **Editorial: A Good Story Ruined by the Facts...**

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On Friday, March 16, 2001, the same email message from several prestigious and trustworthy sources was sent under the subject: "USGS Scientist fired over Arctic National Wildlife Refuge maps." The message contained the URL to a March 15 story running in the *Los Angeles Times* describing in journalistic prose the same account of the e-mail's message. A lengthy letter from the mapping specialist about his firing was included at the end of the email message.

Initial transmissions of the message were coming from researchers who had solid reputations for their research and policy actions over decades. Other origins of the message included professional associations who had worked on countless issues with many previous administrations. Reputable scientists, trusted associations, noted individuals, a newspaper story, and the first-hand account of the unjustly dismissed scientist. This was REAL news!

At the core of this issue was the posting of maps of caribou calving areas in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on the Web site of the (Department of Interior) U.S. Geological Survey's Geospatial Technology Activities at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center <<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/geotech/>>. Given the sensitivity of the issues surrounding drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and the general anti-environmental rhetoric flowing around President George W. Bush's administration, many people thought this story was "the smoking gun." It was described as the extent to which the Bush Administration would go to thwart attempts to prevent tapping the oil resources in ANWR.

Soon cries of "Foul!" "Outrage!" "Censorship!" accompanied the message as it was forwarded on to environment, ecology, natural resources, library, and other discussion lists around the world. Scientists began to comment, while routing the original story on to colleagues, that this was an affront to all scientists doing research under the auspices of the federal government. Federal scientists questioned whether their integrity as scientists was going to be compromised to support political rather than scientific principles. And they had proof-positive with these messages that a new policy of threats and intimidation was just around the corner.

This story spread on the Internet like a wild fire. It was the story that so many people wanted to believe. It was the story that so many people cited as exactly how our environment and the scientists who study it were going

to be treated by the Bush administration. It was the story that so many people wanted to use as a rallying point to protect our environment and natural resources.

Then something happened. Facts started coming out.

The first rebuttal to the initial story came from the USGS itself. The fired employee was not a federal employee but a contract employee. The employee in question did not have proper authorization to post the data that was put on the USGS Web site. The data itself had not undergone proper scientific review. It was becoming apparent to some that "The 'true' story seems to be a little more complicated than described in the earlier postings." Soon other ecologists, GIS experts, and environmental policymakers began adding their own commentaries. Some of these people were personal friends or colleagues of the fired individual. Some vouched for him; others reiterated the concerns voiced by the USGS that the individual was a bit renegade in his approach to providing data, had been warned about his actions, and "should have known better."

The map site was taken down for a period of time. A note from the USGS upon inquiry to the map site read, "Thank you for your note regarding the GIS maps that were temporarily removed from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center's Website. Most of the maps have now been reviewed and are available at <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/geotech/>." Soon email messages began to surface about the integrity of the maps' data (which by now had been removed from and selectively returned to the USGS Web site): "One can only assume that these maps were suppressed because they were incorrect." On the other end of the spectrum were responses about the "official" USGS statement: "It's very complicated and when the USGS PR person keeps doing [such a] good job of disinformation..."

Soon additional information of a more general nature about Clinton-era and the Bush Administration positions on ANWR appeared at <http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,42536,00.html>. The story was by now getting much more complicated, much more bipartisan (if that was even possible), and issues of scientific integrity (or the lack thereof) were circulating in ways to produce some very strange eddies. Data was taken down from the USGS Web site. Map data was restored to the Web site, some of it modified to reflect what some claimed to be a pro-Bush agenda. Some data was not restored to the site.

Professional associations began their own investigations and some within the scientific ranks have come to some similar conclusions about the complexity of the issues presented by this story. They feel this situation was nothing

more than a management decision at the Pawtuxent Wildlife Research Center and that higher levels of DOI had neither knowledge of nor involvement with the dismissal of a contract employee. To my knowledge at the time of this writing, there has not been found any evidence to substantiate the charge that the decision was politically motivated.

The Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association began tracking many of the messages about this story. The very unofficial analyses concluded, "Opinions are mixed." One statement went on to say that the initial outrage over the firing of a scientist has shifted from the cause of his dismissal to a more scientific reflection that "There does seem to be a legitimate issue about peer review of scientific material posted on government Web sites, but it also sounds like a larger management issue and not something to be firing people over."

In response, the nonprofit group Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility was "launching a new campaign to encourage Gale Norton's Department of Interior and the US Congress [to] 1) advocate for an open exchange of governmental scientific and mapping data and 2) issue a policy of non-retaliation against government scientists who display or exchange such data."

There are lessons to be learned from this experience:

- Environmental issues remain extremely volatile

- There is a distrust of government agencies' Public Affairs Offices by environmentalists

- The emotions surrounding critical environmental issues can be manipulated

- Even reliable sources cannot transcend the emotional volatility

- Even reliable sources can get it wrong

- Check your resources, check them again, and then re-check them before taking definitive actions

- Environmental actions (or in-actions) by the current Administration will come under severe criticism

Life for those dealing with environmental issues, regardless of political position, is going to be extremely interesting over the course of the next couple of years. The controversy surrounding this story, and its widespread distribution, indicate that many battles about our environment and natural resources are going to be fought. Recent news reports over environmental and natural resources cuts in the FY '02 Federal budget proposed by President Bush, proposed changes in a Clinton-era arsenic-in-drinking-water standard, withdrawal of the U.S. from the Kyoto Protocol's climate change

negotiations, and resource harvesting in and on Federal lands all point to the future's environmental battlegrounds.

As librarians and information professionals we must be aware of the roles we play in these battles. We are the ammunition carriers--the information providers. But for which side of the issue... We are and will be called upon to provide data and information about environmental issues ranging from wetlands data for a parcel of land adjacent to a proposed housing development in our community to information concerning the U.S. position on global climate change. We may face situations requiring us to provide information for organizations, to individuals, and about positions that run contrary to our own personal beliefs.

However, even carefully gathered and well-meaning facts do not necessarily represent the truth, which is a much more subjective tenet. We look at the "facts" through a series of filters and lenses that represent a wide variety of social and cultural factors that will alter our view of the "real" environment and provide for us our vision of the "perceived" environment. Two persons looking at the same set of "facts" can (and with issues about the environment and natural resources often do) come to very different conclusions based on their interpretations.

Objective facts can inform us and provide a real picture. It is, though, our perceptions of those facts that lead us into actions, actions based on social constructs.

If this one example can accurately be characterized as a good story ruined by the facts, our professional role must be to assure that complete and authoritative facts are provided to make good (and true) stories.

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