

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

The Observatory: CJR's Science, Environment, and Health Desk

The Observatory, launched in 2007, is an online, rapid-response critique of science, environment, and health news coverage that has received widespread accolades throughout the science journalism community.

Climate change and the nation's energy future have moved to center stage, elevating environmental issues to a prominence not seen since the oil crises of the 1970s. Yet clean energy is not the only crucial scientific issue that we face. Food security, water shortages, and emerging diseases are among the challenges faces the nation and the world, and the need for accurate, credible journalism has never been more critical. Yet science desks at our nation's news organizations are shrinking and disappearing. An array of Web sites and blogs crank out a torrent of scientific, environmental, and health news, but the quality varies, and many are advocacy operations, not objective, journalistic endeavors.

The Observatory was established to encourage the best in science journalism, and also to provide a credible source for readers to help them navigate the new media landscape, pointing out the best reporting in the field, as well as where and how the press falls victim to spin, engages in alarmism, perpetrates false balance, or misrepresents scientific research. The Observatory also helps journalists identify interesting and important stories, sources, and information. And it often parses the accuracy of competing claims about the issues at hand.

The Observatory is among three online science sources called "the future of science journalism" by American University professor Matthew Nisbet on his blog, Framing Science. Its work has been credited and discussed at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wired*, *The New Republic*, NPR, Grist, ScienceBlogs, Greenwire, the Knight Science Journalism Tracker, and *Utne Reader*, among many others.

The Observatory team includes Curtis Brainard, the editor and lead writer; Cristine Russell, a CJR contributing editor and president of the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing; regular contributor Paul Raeburn, the former science editor of *The Associated Press* and *BusinessWeek*; and two advisors: *Scientific American* contributing editor Marguerite Holloway and Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist Jonathan Weiner.