

## MERC and the media

By Randy Seaver  
Editor

In the early 1990s, readers of this newspaper listed the Maine Energy Recovery Company's trash-to-energy incinerator in downtown Biddeford as "the most important" issue facing the tri-community area.

Roughly 15 years later, the cities of Biddeford and Saco are on the verge of developing a long-term "solution" with MERC's new owners. After filing repeated lawsuits against the company, city officials are well aware that their current "host communities" contract with MERC will expire in less than two years.

Thus, the cities have essentially two options on the table: either buy-out the plant to close it down or enter into a new contract with tougher operating protocols. Residents remain divided on the issue, according to the results of a telephone survey that the two cities commissioned earlier this year.

But in that same survey, nearly half of the residents polled also said they had heard or read little to nothing about MERC during the last few months, begging the question of whether the media has done enough to cover the issue.

Many MERC critics say that better media coverage may have prevented the incinerator from being built in the center of the downtown area. In Old Town, a group that has vocally criticized the development of a regional landfill in their community also bemoans the lack of "aggressive" media attention when it comes to solid waste issues.

Journalists who have covered the MERC debate and the landfill expansion in Old Town offered mixed reactions to the criticisms of their coverage, but did agree that the media plays an essential role in the debate, if only to place it into a proper context for their readers or viewers.

### Fair and balanced?

"I don't think it is our job — at least not as reporters — to take a position on these or any other issues," said Aimee Dolloff, a staff writer for the Bangor Daily News who has been covering the Old Town area for the last two years. "The media has a responsibility to address all sides of any issue."

But Richard Rhames of Biddeford disagrees with that generally accepted principle of journalism, pointing to the corporate influence that has increasingly dominated media markets during the last 20 years.

In a weekly column he wrote for this newspaper, Rhames often criticized what he saw as corporate influence over so-called "mainstream" media outlets. Today, he said, the problem has only gotten worse, despite the increase of "independent" journalists and "bloggers" on the internet and public access television stations.

Rhames said it is nearly impossible for members of the mainstream media to practice what he calls "advocacy journalism," which is exactly what Harry Sanborn, an Alton resident whose home sits across the street from the West Old Town landfill, would like to see applied in his struggle to have more say over that issue.

And Rhames is not alone. One only has to surf the internet for a few minutes to find a plethora of other media critics who essentially say the same things, pointing to the media's bottom line pursuits as the primary reason why style has taken priority over substance in mass media markets.

Corporate influence in the media, critics say, affects everything from smaller newsrooms with fewer reporters to "quashing" stories that may reflect poorly on media advertisers, the main source of revenue for all commercial media companies.

In the book "Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering," editors paint a grim portrait of what American media has become, leading off their examination of media trends with a comparison of two very different mission statements.

The first statement is from Walter Williams who wrote the "Journalist's Creed" in 1914. Williams' statement is punctuated often by mention of the "public trust" and the "responsibility" of journalists to recognize that trust.

The second statement was issued by Knight-Ridder, one of the country's largest media conglomerates, in 1997. That "Statement of Strategic Intent" focuses upon "excellent customer service" and providing a "strong return for our shareholders."

### Do you care?

Regardless of corporate influence upon media outlets, some journalists say many of their readers or viewers don't want to be saturated on any single issue, especially those that are complex or involve a sense of personal responsibility.

Alex Irvine won this year's New England Press Association award for investigative journalism after he wrote "Dumping Ground," a comprehensive April 8, 2004 story about the state's West Old Town landfill deal for the Portland Phoenix, a weekly newspaper in Portland.

Irvine, 36, has since left the newspaper business in order to write a novel and said he was disappointed that no larger media outlets — especially the Portland Press Herald — followed up on his story, one that involved two large corporations, the creation of a mega-landfill and the promise of saving jobs in a mill town.

"Let's face it," Irvine said. "Trash just isn't a very sexy topic. It's something that no one wants to think about. It's a lot easier for people to get frosted about Michael Jackson or Terri Schiavo because those stories don't require a lot of thought."

While Irvine criticized the Press Herald for not covering the story, which he said allowed the state to act as "a bagman for two powerful corporations that will be able to make millions of dollars as a result of the deal" (Casella Waste Systems and Georgia Pacific), he also concedes that most reporters don't have the time or resources to provide "in-depth" coverage of complex issues.

"I could not have done that story if I were facing daily deadline pressures," Irvine said. "And that, I think, is a big advantage to working at smaller, weekly newspapers. It took me three weeks to put together that one story."

Alan Grover, a reporter for WABI-TV in Bangor, also won a media award for his coverage of the West Old Town Landfill story.

Grover said solid waste issues are "not near the top" of concerns by most people in Maine. Furthermore, he said such issues are extraordinarily complex, mainly because of the "myriad of laws" governing the solid waste industry.

When asked if the media did a good enough job of covering the West Old Town landfill deal, Grover said he was unsure, saying not many people attended public hearings on the issue. On the other hand, he said, the deal was orchestrated at the last minute and would affect a lot more people than just the abutters, who received notices about the hearing.

"It was clear to us that this was a statewide issue," Grover said. "At the same time, there seemed to be little interest in the story from people in southern Maine, and I found that to be a curious situation."

Grover said people who supported the landfill deal thought that he and his colleagues were making "mountains out of molehills" on their coverage of the story while opponents of the plan simultaneously criticized the lack of coverage.

"It's a big, big story," Grover said. "And the state's claim that no out of state waste will be going there just isn't true. It will be interesting to see how this pans out."

### When does it matter?

Murray Carpenter is the editor and publisher of Northern Sky News, a monthly environmental newspaper headquartered in Belfast. He said many people tend to minimize an issue until it either hits them in the pocketbook or lands in their own backyards.

"It is a hard issue to report on," Carpenter said of solid waste issues. "One of the biggest challenges is the difficulty in getting good statistics — even from the State Planning Office."

Carpenter agrees that many reporters tread lightly on certain issues because of their own inescapable link to corporate interests. "When was the last time you saw a really good environmental piece on the automobile industry?" he asked. "When you're talking about garbage — something that we all produce — you don't have the moral certainty to come out slashing on the issue."

As long as the state continues telling people that Maine needs more landfill capacity, Carpenter said many people will generally accept those statement as part of a necessary evil, one which also allows a great amount of convenience in readers' daily lives. "Unfortunately, I think a lot of people feel as if they don't have to pay attention."

The only way that will change, Carpenter said, is when people have to start paying a lot more money for their own trash disposal. "Rising gas prices have suddenly made people start looking at their own mile-

age performance," he said. "For now, [solid waste issues] are limited to the people directly affected. Otherwise, it's generally viewed as an abstract issue."

Carpenter's statements seem to play out in the results of the Biddford-Saco telephone survey about MERC. While a majority of people said they favored the idea of closing the plant, the numbers fell off sharply once they were asked how much financial burden they would be willing to suffer in order to make it happen.

### The media's role

So, if Dolloff says the media has an obligation to be fair while Rhames says the media should lean more to advocacy, which one is right?

It's a difficult question to answer, especially since journalism has evolved — for better or worse — in order to keep pace with today's marketplace and readers.

"I think any complex issue presents a certain challenge to reporters, but our job is to simplify those issues — not only for our readers, but so that the process [of debate] can move forward," Dolloff said. "I think our readers do research on the issues they feel personally connected to."

On the other hand, Rhames said mass media outlets have only aggravated the so-called "dumbing down of America" by over simplifying the news and chasing stories that their competitors are also chasing.

Rhames, a longtime critic of the MERC plant and a longtime supporter of public access media, concedes that he "hasn't paid much attention" to the Courier's MERC: In Focus series. "I've glanced at it," he said during a telephone interview from his home on Saturday.

When asked about the performance of local media outlets in the ongoing MERC debate, Rhames said he has a hard time remembering exact details of the issue's coverage in the early 1980s, when the proposal to build the incinerator was first mentioned.

Lee Burnett, who spent nearly two decades (1980-1999) as a reporter at the Journal Tribune, agrees with those who say the media was asleep at the proverbial wheel when the MERC plant was first proposed.

"It was an incremental process," Burnett recalled of the plant's de-

velopment and approval process in the early 1980s. "In retrospect, it was a classic, textbook example of how to get a controversial topic through the process without much scrutiny. It was a masterful job of political maneuvering."

According to Burnett, public hearings on the matter were conducted as "preliminary" approvals while city and company officials assured critics there would be ample time later on to address their concerns before a final decision was made.

"There never was an up or down vote on the whole kit and caboodle," Burnett said. "At some point, people were told, 'no, you can't back down now, you already said you wanted it.'"

While media coverage of the preliminary siting process could be described as perfunctory at best, Burnett said the media has since provided blanket coverage on the issue, especially after the plant was constructed and began experiencing problems, including ash spills, labor problems and odor complaints.

"The stories are endless," he said. "But they all seem to be coming from the same angle — that MERC is not a good neighbor. It's easy for the media to cover NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) stories."

But Burnett said corporate influence had little to no effect on the coverage — before or after the incinerator was built.

"If someone's squawking, the media will cover it," he said. "There were so many buzzwords being used to discourage scrutiny. The words 'state of the art' were thrown around like you wouldn't believe."

Rhames described Burnett as the "best reporter" to cover York County in recent memory, but also said reporters, even those with ambition, are limited by factors beyond their control.

"Even in Lee's case, when you have someone who is willing to dig deeper into a story, it becomes a question of manpower and the allocation of resources," Rhames said. "He did some great coverage on MERC, but it's always something that has to be cleared by an editor and ultimately a publisher. And let's face it; advertisers will only pay for a certain kind of product, certainly not one that's critical of their own interests."

"It's not just about the initiative of reporters; there are structural problems in how media companies are run," he added. "I'm not saying that Satan is sitting at the head of the table — reporting on this type of issue is work. Is it easy? No. But it's not supposed to be easy."