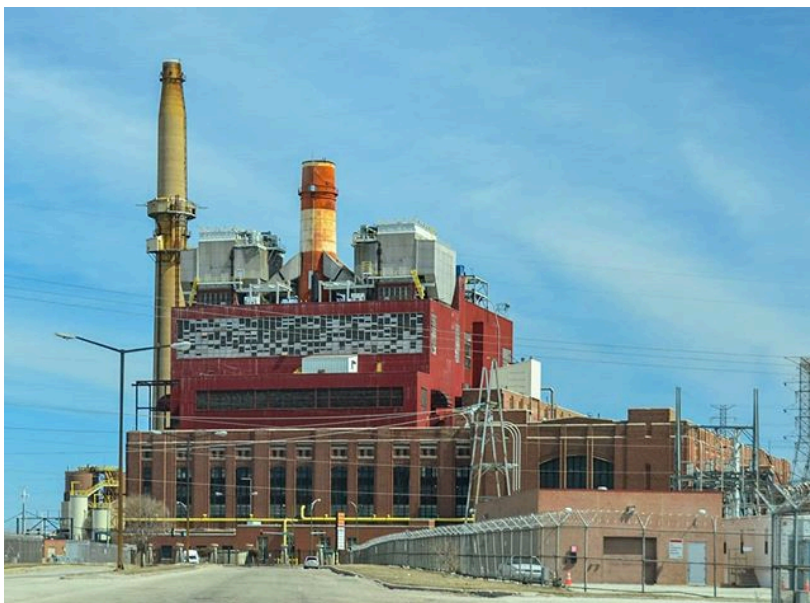


# News outlets struggle to cover environmental policy that impact communities of color

Residents of two predominantly Latino neighborhoods in Chicago faced years of poor air quality living near a coal-treating plant. But it wasn't until the plant was demolished, sending a plume of dust into the air and finally bringing attention to its environmental impact, that news outlets took notice.

The plume was easy to cover. It had visuals made-for-TV and residents distressed about the impact on their health.

But in this case and others like it, including a wood-treating plant in southern Illinois, news outlets struggle to cover the environmental racism behind policies that have allowed industries to operate—often with little oversight, in communities of color.



(Photo by Eric Allix Rogers via Flickr)

In April 2020, when construction crews for Hilco Redevelopment Partners began to tear down the Crawford Generating Station in

Chicago, they created a massive cloud of dust over the neighborhoods and on residences less than 50 feet away.

“That made a lot of news,” said William Bike, the editor of the Gazette-Chicago, a monthly community newspaper. “Pilsen and Little Village completely flipped and started being opposed to plants,” Bike said.

Residents told WGN-TV that their health was harmed by toxic dust permeating their community.

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot issued a stop-work order, halting the demolition.

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul filed a suit against Hilco and its demolition contractors Management Corporation and Controlled Demolition Inc. for violating state pollution laws.

The coal plant was built in 1924 and permanently closed in 2012 because Midwest Generation’s owners disagreed with the financial burden of complying with air standards and would rather shut down.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, minority, low-income, and indigenous populations frequently bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harm and adverse health outcomes while living near power plants that cause air pollution.

The health effects of air pollution include the development of heart or lung diseases, such as asthma and bronchitis, according to the USEPA. Also, increased susceptibility to respiratory cardiac symptoms and premature deaths can occur.

None of this was news to the people who lived near the Chicago plant.

According to an analysis by the Chicago Reporter in 2008, public health data showed people living closer to the power

plant had higher death rates because of lung and heart disease.

The western Chicago neighborhoods also had higher hospitalization rates for asthma or bronchitis than other parts of the city.

The Crawford power station and another, Fisk Generating plant, another coal-fired electric station, both primarily impacted communities of Color, said Bike, of the Gazette-Chicago, which covered both stories.

Out of the six operational coal-burning plants in the Chicago area in the early-2000s, Fisk and Crawford were five miles apart.

The Fisk station went into service in Pilsen in 1903, closing in 2012 after air pollution disasters.

## **Industrial plants and where people live**

Leslie Duram, professor of geography in the School of Earth Systems and Sustainability and director of the Environmental Studies minor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, said how you think about environmental geography is an excellent way to think about environmental racism.

Duram said this comparison works because geographers deal so much with the place and people.

A question such as why one neighborhood is impacted more than another neighborhood by an environmental hazard suggests a place issue, Duram said.

Environmental racism is closely linked because it deals with the interface between people and the environment, Duram said.

“Whether it’s waste management or toxic spills... we’re finding that Black and brown communities are impacted more heavily,”

Duram said.

According to the [landmark Toxic Wastes and Race report](#) by the United Church of Christ, industrial companies that mishandled toxic waste and potential pathways for contaminants to pollute the environment or pose an exposure risk to the community is a significant issue facing communities of color compared to other demographics.

“If you look at the demographics and you look at the people and the environment... you’re going to see that overlap where lower income and minority communities are closer to these environmental degradation sites,” Duram said.

Duram said whether the industry entered the environment before or after the residents is such a difficult question.

“I think throughout time you can say that lower income, poorer people were always next to those environmentally degraded areas,” Duram said.

“There are poor people who are going to be living in the dumps,” Duram said.

Duram said she thinks that this reality has intensified through time due to specific demographic groups’ lack of financial ability to leave these areas.

This seemingly is a structural aspect to this issue, Duram said.

“Rich people who have power want to stay and become more rich or stay and become more powerful,” Duram said.

“That always is going to harm people who have less power and less money,” Duram said.

Duram said there is a correlation between basic geography and the mobility aspect of who can move in and out of polluted communities.

“There’s not a lot of options for lower income people,” Duram said.

## **Mainstream v. grassroots journalism**

Whether or not these issues involve minority communities mainly being impacted by industrial hazards due to geographical and economic reasons, Duram said she does not mean to be harsh.

Duram said it feels to her that most mainstream news in America does not address environmental injustice very much at all.

“Mainstream news may have a very short news cycle...oh, there’s breaking news about toxic waste and then it’s over and we don’t talk about it, the aftermath, or any health issues after the fact,” Duram said.

Duram said the rare long-term, consistent view of environmental news in the mainstream press is depressing because what mainstream does do is a fast pass over, do one story, and that is it.

Duram asked, why don’t we report more on the environment?

Duram said our lives depend on it, and it matters that we have clean water, air, and food that we can eat daily.

“The news should cover those types of stories to keep us up to date on what’s going on, even local environmental issues,” Duram said.

Bike said environmental issues might get some coverage by the Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune, and television stations, but nobody covers it and neighborhood papers.

The stories featured in the Gazette are pretty significant, and that is something mainstream media may not have time to cover in-depth, Bike said.

“Our reporters have time to really delve into issues and really write about the complicated things and these pollution stories are pretty complex,” Bike said.

Bike said if you look at the Sun-Times or the Tribune, their stories are pretty short. The same thing with television.

“You’re talking about a feature on the news that’s a few seconds long,” Bike said.

Bike said he thinks local press such as the Block Club Chicago can do a better job because it can delve into the issue and devote space.

Bike also said community groups have statistical information about the prevalence of diseases near the power plant beneficial for the local press because of close community-newspaper relationships that mainstream newspapers may not have.

“We’ve got relationships with the local community groups,” Bike said. “It’s not really that interesting for the mainstream media to cover, but it is for us.”

Andrea Firestone, broadcast content manager for KSDK, an NBC-news affiliate located in St. Louis, Missouri, said it is hard to put a number on how often her station covers an environmental issue.

“If there’s a tip or an idea about an environmental issue, we cover it...but, I’m not sure if it’s daily, weekly, or even monthly,” Firestone said.

Firestone said she thinks it depends on the day’s news and what is happening.

It does not need to be a disaster, Firestone said.

Usually, the environmental stories the station covers on the local level are pollution or problems. The national news the

station covers is more climate change and global warming.

“Weather is probably our number one priority to inform and keep our viewers safe when it comes to weather that is threatening their lives,” Firestone said.

“We will absolutely cover an environmental issue in a community that impacts people,” Firestone said.

Firestone said the station tries to keep their target audience in mind, usually the striving, working-class.

The striving, working-class is individuals making great efforts to achieve or obtain something in the labor force who do not have bachelor’s degrees, including high school dropouts, high school graduates, people with some college, and associate’s degree-holders.

Firestone said her station’s veteran reporters have sources all over St. Louis, including the city, Metro-East, East St. Louis, north and south St. Louis county, and affluent, striving, working-class areas.

“We really strive to reach every group of the community,” Firestone said. “What’s happening in our local area is what we’re giving the most air-time.”

Sometimes environmental stories, you have to get a response from the government, investigate what the people in the community are saying, talk to a scientist or professor who is an expert on the issue to get the whole story, Firestone said.

Firestone said these stories are not something you can turn in a day on deadline.

Firestone said that anytime the station is doing a story on an environmental issue, the reporters seek university science expertise such as Washington University in St. Louis, University of Missouri St. Louis, and sometimes SIU

Edwardsville.

Firestone said the reporters at her station usually could not get officials over the phone who work at federal agencies such as the EPA for interviews.

“Most of them have a spokesperson in the office of communications where you call them and they call you back or send an email,” Firestone said. “Most of the time, they’ll give you a statement.”

If the station is covering a developing story that made national headlines, sometimes a government official or their spokesperson will be in town, and the station can get an interview with them.

Firestone said she thinks her reporters have to be persistent when gaining information from public or government sources on an environmental story.

“If it’s earlier in the day and they’re usually these government workers who are out the door by five o’clock...you have to call first thing and be very persistent in order to get a response from them,” Firestone said.

Firestone said she thinks that elected officials who represent their communities, such as aldermen, mayors, council members, state senators, and representatives, are willing to talk about environmental issues affecting their constituents.

“Usually, there’s a state representative or U.S. senator that leads the effort to change on an environmental issue and they become the point person,” Firestone said.

## **Government deters journalists**

Amelia Blakely, a reporter for the Southern Illinoian and former journalism student at SIUC, said there seems like a gap in public information.



Blakely said that the gap is where an environmental issue will occur, and the media will wait before it becomes news because work has to be done on the government level.

Blakely said she worked for Illinois senator Tammy Duckworth, so she understands what has happened in local or state government.

According to a press release, Duckworth helped [introduce](#) the Environmental Justice for Communities Act to support communities experiencing environmental injustices, which the deadly COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated.

Duckworth also recently [introduced](#) the Environmental Justice for All Act, sweeping legislation that would help achieve health equity and climate justice for all, particularly underserved communities and communities of color that have long been disproportionately harmed by environmental injustices and toxic pollutants, press release.

Around this time last year, Duckworth helped [announce](#) the introduction of legislation that would create and authorize funding for a system to comprehensively identify the demographic factors, environmental burdens, socioeconomic conditions, and public health concerns related to environmental justice and collect high-quality data.

(Duckworth's advocacy – along with that of Rep. Cori Bush of St. Louis and Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass. – led to passage this summer of the Environmental Justice Mapping and Data Collection Act. The [law](#) was included in the omnibus Inflation Reduction Act passed in Congress in August.)“Officials are aware of these issues fairly quickly, but they won't make it public knowledge until they know the steps they are going to take,” Blakely said.

Blakely said she understands that from a local government perspective because you want to have a game-plan or approach before letting things become public knowledge.

However, it hinders the reporting process for journalists, Blakely said.

“I might get a tip from somebody, but then I won’t really be able to go investigate yet because I’m just going to be stonewalled,” Blakely said.

“I’m not going to get information until after everything is said and done,” Blakely said.

Blakely also said that makes it difficult because reporters only have a certain amount of time to follow a lead on a story.

“It’s very difficult when you have people on the inside trying to clean things up or trying to do good work, but there’s no communication and bridges in my position,” Blakely said.

There might be journalists who have had relationships with government entities such as the USEPA, local city hall, or regional EPA offices for years, but from Blakely’s experience as a young reporter, that is not what she is used to.

“I think these experiences deter a lot of journalists because it makes you not even want to talk to them because you don’t have faith that you’re going to have a good conversation,” Blakely said.

Blakely said she really can not trust the USEPA and does not think many people in public can.

“Out of all the government agencies, you want to trust them because they’re in charge of the environmental health,” Blakely said. “You can’t.”

The aura, the energy, and the vibes that the USEPA officials give off, especially those in charge of communicating with the public, feel like you are not welcomed.

“I don’t want to waste my time if you’re going to lie to me

and I don't want to perpetuate the lies," Blakely said.

Blakely said other well-intentioned journalists, whether white or not, who have a naive perception of the government and think they are supposed to help the American people are shattered.

"Whenever I'm speaking to someone at the USEPA, I see them as a human...as someone that might be a really good person, but where they're employed, they're having to work towards a certain goal and our goals are not the same," Blakely said.

Blakely said she thinks gaining comment from federal agencies for an environmental piece is difficult because good things such as teamwork and cooperation are hard to get out of.

"We're serving different people with different agendas and goals," Blakely said.

Blakely said that the American story is the people working at these agencies, trying to serve a purpose, yet their bosses may have different agendas.

"You have people at the bottom level who want to do the work, but it seems like good people don't always necessarily get promoted," Blakely said.

Blakely also said the people who get to call the shots may be less qualified or have not as good intentions.

"That's a very tough and unique circumstance, but that situation is inherently unequal," Blakely said.

This internal problem within journalism and federal agencies translate into pollution and toxicity impacting communities of color, making it hard to legitimize those stories.

"Unfortunately, communities of color aren't believed," Blakely said.

Blakely asked she could get why, but how?

Whenever you listen to people's stories and drop all the biases or reliance on how the government is always right, it is tough not to believe them.

"If you don't have the government's backing, people in more affluent places or don't have experience with contamination may be looking down on them, even though they don't realize they are," Blakely said.

If the government is not saying yes, this is true, or yes, we are helping you, then the people facing pollution are not believed.

"If we trace this problem to the people who have power and the people who don't have power for whatever reason...whether it's class or it's social...you start to have this imbalance between who's believed and legitimized versus who isn't," Blakely said.

The U.S. has historically pushed people out who are minority or poor and forget about them on the outskirts and not centered in society.

Blakely said stories of environmental racism are newsworthy because journalists will perpetuate the same types of practices if they continue to put people of color on the outskirts of things and not center their concerns, experiences, and quality of living.

Journalists have to use principles to decide what is a story or not, Blakely said. What that means is that journalists have to be active for democracy.

"With environmental racism, we have to be guided by our principles to decide what's newsworthy and what's not newsworthy," Blakely said.

The Pilsen and Little Village communities impacted by the

Crawford Station demolition are under Region V of the USEPA, overseeing corrective actions for Superfund sites.

This region also regulates the former Koppers wood-treating plant in Carbondale, Illinois, near a Black community facing decades of environmental pollution.

News outlets also failed to report in detail on [that story](#).

Editor's note: You can read all of the stories [here](#).

*Clarissa Cowley received her MS in media management in May, 2022 from SIUC. Her senior project focused on environmental racism and the impact of the Koppers creosote contamination on a small Black community in Carbondale. She is now a Producer-In-Residence at 5 On Your Side at KSDK in St. Louis.*