

# How Journalists Fan the Flames of Wildfire in the West

By **Andrew Graham** - November 22, 2015



*New vegetation fills an old burn area from the Trapper Fire in 2003. (Jake Green)*

Firefighters often talk about the incomparable beauty of a forest burning at night. Fire fascinates. Its flicker in a campsite has always been mesmerizing. Forest fires are something else entirely, mixing fear, awe and untamed natural beauty.

In the media, wildfire is either feared or fought, and thus mischaracterized and misunderstood. The most specialized scientists, much less reporters, still don't entirely understand how it fits into the western landscape. For the "Burn" edition of Montana Journalism Review, I set out to understand the role media plays in the West's evolving relationship with wildfire.



*Dead trees stand among new vegetation that has formed since the Reynolds Creek Fire in Glacier National Park. (Jake Green)*

In the news, wildfire often comes across as incomprehensible and unfair. And in many ways, it is—the Valley Fire in California last September burned 1,958 homes and businesses. Four people died. Video shot by an escaping resident shows a harrowing drive through a community transported to the bowels of hell. Ash flies across the windshield and flames run across the ground. A house in the darkness is defined by flames pouring from its windows.

These are desperate, stirring images of a natural phenomenon with the power to swallow homes and towns whole. On the flip side, there is the equally dramatic story of our fight against the flames. Each summer, air tankers etch red lines of fire retardant across our screens and front pages. Smoke columns, flaming trees, firefighters marching in formation, blackened forests and gutted homes are familiar images to those in the West.

## *“HARMLESS FIRES ARE RARELY WRITTEN ABOUT, AND WHY WOULD THEY BE?”*

“If you want to get media attention, or popular attention or political attention, you basically have to burn up a bunch of houses, kill people or involve celebrities. And a

celebrity landscape will do, it could be Yellowstone, Yosemite. That will do it," Stephen Pyne, a fire historian and professor at Arizona State University, told me.

While this is true of national media, similar criteria holds sway over local outlets. The news is rarely the fire itself; it is the way the fire interacts with those living on the landscape.

It's the West's own little war at home, and it's escalating every summer. Some call the resulting media coverage "fire porn."

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Journalists who cover wildfire in Montana will tell you that if you want to get close to the flames you need to be there as soon after a fire's start as possible. Once the Forest Service bureaucracy is in place, it's usually too late. "Don't get on the phone or anything," Sam Wilson, a reporter for the Flathead Valley's Daily Inter Lake told me. "Just get in the car and go."

I spent the summer tracking fire's eastward march on InciWeb, a government website that carries information on all active wildfires and is updated by the Public Information Officers (PIOs) on scene. In the second week of August, lightning storms over dry forests ignited a series of fires and the 2015 Montana fire season was well underway.



*Karl Puckett, a reporter for the Great Falls Tribune, takes a video of Wayne Phillips, a retired Forest Service ecologist. Puckett brought Phillips to the Reynolds Creek fire in Glacier National Park to learn how vegetation regrows after a fire. While out reporting, Puckett is constantly capturing photos and videos to use for himself as well for multimedia pieces. (Jake Green)*

On Friday, August 14, 2015, the Sucker Creek Fire outside Lincoln, Montana, grew large enough to warrant evacuation orders for more than 50 homes. After a few days of checking in with the PIO, I learned a media tour would be leaving from the Lincoln Ranger Station, about an hour east of Missoula.

In the parking lot, the media put on the yellow non-flammable Nomex shirts that are standard issue for firefighters and were provided for media on site. With me were two broadcast reporters and a photographer from Helena news outlets.

"Hopefully we'll get some retardant drops for you guys," said Kathy Bushnell, the fire's PIO and that day's tour guide.

"Lovely," replied one of the reporters. Air drops make great footage.

For the first few days, there had been none. At the fire's start Lincoln District Ranger

Michael Stansberry addressed this at a public meeting: “I already had a question called in asking ‘why isn’t there an air show?’” The fire was burning in a forest full of dead lodgepole pines, and the intense heat of this heavy burning fuel meant water from helicopters and fire retardant from air tankers would have little effect. With limited resources and fires burning around the region, no aircraft had gone to Lincoln.

But now houses were threatened and an observation plane was circling the fire. Two helicopters were pulling water out of nearby streams and an air tanker was flying to and from Helena.

The TV reporters framed their shots so that interviews would capture the smoking ridgeline in the background. The smoke column was impressive, the fire burning more than 1,300 acres. With a telephoto lens, you could catch the occasional orange flash of flame.

A hot wind blew and the non-flammable yellow shirts grew itchy as the sun beat down. We were more than a mile away from the fire.

A segment ran on NBC Montana’s evening broadcast for two minutes. “When I was there it was evident that firefighting efforts on the ground and in the sky are far from over,” reporter Mikenzie Frost began. Against background images of smokey plumes, Frost and officials spoke about air tactics, resources and evacuations. Neither mentioned that most of the threatened structures were vacation cabins.

On one hand, the broadcast was simple breaking news: how many acres were burning, what was threatened and what was being done to stop it. On the other hand, it fell far short of telling the whole story.

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Fire coverage, says Stephen Pyne, usually takes one of two templates. A longtime voice in the fire science community, Pyne is a natural historian, former firefighter and author of 15 books on wildland fire—none of which, he notes, has received the media attention or the sales of his other books, which range in topic from the Grand Canyon to the Voyager space missions.

One media template frames fire as a natural disaster, with coverage resembling that of floods or tornadoes. Forest fires are treated as fast moving threats that towns have to brace themselves against, much as cities along the East Coast do with hurricanes.

The other template uses a narrative borrowed from war coverage, with wildland fires as the battleground. "They wear uniforms, they've got their armored divisions, they've got their air support," Pyne says. "It's presented as a military fight."

Part of that narrative reflects how firefighters themselves talk about fire. Wildfire suppression is managed as a military campaign, with the fire as the enemy. There are paratroopers (smokejumpers), marines (hotshot crews) and air strikes (retardant and water drops). They set up defensive lines to push the fire in the direction they want it to go. They try to flank the fire, but sometimes the fire outflanks them, or overruns their lines.



*Wayne Phillips (left), a retired ecologist, shows Karl Puckett (right), a reporter from the Great Falls Tribune, how vegetation had regrown since the Trapper Fire of 2003 in Glacier National Park. Puckett brought Phillips to Glacier to learn how vegetation grows after a fire and how fire aids an ecosystem for an article Puckett was writing. (Jake Green)*

In 2015, the military narrative became even more poignant when soldiers and airmen were called up to fight fires in Washington state. “We protect our country from all enemies foreign and domestic, so this is, I’ll call it a domestic enemy,” one soldier told a local NBC affiliate.

Tight deadlines and limited resources make it hard to tell a deeper story with fire. Dramatic narratives of firefighters battling a natural disaster are easy, especially with PIOs on hand to tell them and air tankers painting photo opportunities across the sky.

Neither narrative serves the story well. Both avoid the nuanced problems of a unique relationship between mankind and nature, instead portraying large fires as the cost of doing business.

The same day I toured the Sucker Creek Fire with the broadcast journalists, I met Karl Puckett, natural resource reporter for the Great Falls Tribune. He and photographer Rion Sanders were waiting at the ranger station for Bushnell to ferry us all back to her vantage point. I left my yellow Nomex at the station, while Puckett and Sanders kept theirs in their backpacks.

Writing for a daily paper, Puckett faces tight deadlines just like TV reporters. But if you follow his byline, you can see that long experience (he’s covered wildfire since 2000) has led him to explore deeper questions about fire.

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Reporters for Montana newspapers talk about how once a fire season gets rolling, there’s often little time for anything else. Their job becomes limited to the blow by blow of each individual fire: acreage burned, resources on hand, etc.

“If you can get some context into the story for daily coverage that’s the ideal,” Puckett said. In Lincoln, he tried to do that by getting close to the flames.

Tall, broad-shouldered and gruff, Puckett cuts an imposing figure for a reporter. As the car turned onto a closed road, a sheriff’s deputy at the roadblock jokingly asked if they should put a leash on the media.

There were chuckles from the car, but Puckett just growled, “no.”

We stopped at the same vantage point as before. Puckett moved continuously, peeling in to catch conversations and then walking away, crossing the road and then crossing back to enter the field and try a different angle for capturing video on his phone.

“Are we going to see something better than this?” he eventually asked Bushnell. She couldn’t take them farther, but Puckett asked the Sheriff, Leo Dutton, for a ride and he took us up to the fire’s front. That’s the difference between an elected sheriff and a PIO, Puckett told me afterwards.

By late afternoon, the fire was burning downhill with just a few hundred yards of trees between it and Copper Creek Road. If the fire crossed it, more evacuations would be ordered. We stood on the road with Dutton, his deputy and three trucks worth of firefighters, watching trees torch on the ridge above.



*Public Information Officers John Zwierzchowski (left) and Sara Rouse (center) show reporter Colin Murphy a map of a fire located around 30 miles west of Missoula. Murphy took a media tour of the fire zone led by the PIOs, who act as an intermediary between the media and the fire crews, providing information and leading media tours. Because of the potential danger of fire, personnel are required to wear fire-retardant clothing.*

*(Jake Green)*

Wildfire burns quickly uphill but slowly on the way down, and though there were grumblings from the fire safety officer, no one on the road was too concerned. For the firefighters, the real excitement was a trophy bull elk standing between us and the fire.

A scraggly line of flame crackled downhill. The smoke was thick and dark. Flames flashed from it like lightning in a storm front. The sight was intriguing, even awe inspiring—it had the campfire effect. I'd never been that close to a wildfire, but I'd like to be there again. It wasn't scary. This wasn't California's deadly Valley Fire, and most aren't.

Because fires that are quickly put out don't become news, the public receives distorted images showing only the most destructive, out-of-control fires. Harmless fires are rarely written about, and why would they be? Why does it matter if they aren't? Fire coverage may seem superficial to some, but from a local news standpoint it does its job by covering evacuations and fire size.

Puckett later told me his story captured a snapshot of what a fire really looks like. "It's not like a huge flame wall. It's important to show that."

But a broader perspective requires one to step back from the flames.

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The problem is that the view the public gets of fire is almost exclusively negative. "People think that the normal state of our ecosystems is an absence of fire," said Mark Finney, a researcher at the Forest Service's Fire Sciences Laboratory in Missoula.

It's well known that many fire experts—particularly ecologists—think the Forest Service's propensity to put out as many fires as possible is a mistake. Some of those experts believe the press helps drive this poor policy.

In his office, I asked Finney for specific examples. "Let's just go to the Internet," he said, and brought up an article from the Los Angeles Times: "Valley fire spread with 'mind-boggling' speed, experts say." He took umbrage with the choice of experts, noting that the chief expert source was a climate scientist, not a fire scientist. "They don't talk to any experts who would know whether it's mind-boggling or not, and it ain't mind-boggling."

It's been a destructive year for wildfire, but that's not surprising to those in fire science. If the fires of 2015 have been unexpected, it's because we have false expectations, Finney says. If anyone in California is surprised by the Valley Fire, it's because they don't understand where they live.

There is a choice to be made with fire, which Finney says is not made clear to the public.

"We've proven that we cannot keep fire out. It is inevitable, it will occur. Everywhere there's fuel, you will have fire. Your choice is, when do you want it and what do you want it to do? That's all you have, those are your choices. Your choices are not whether to have fire or not."

With an ever-increasing budget to suppress fire, there is a discord in logic that isn't being questioned. Spending more and more money isn't leading to better results. Finney calls it dropping wet dollar bills on fires.

In keeping with the militaristic narrative of the firefight, Finney compared the media's lack of questioning fire suppression to the free ride many say the press gave the U.S. government to justify the War on Terror.

We left his office and moved down the hall to a silo-like room called the combustion laboratory. Finney stopped by a uniform forest of tiny cardboard "trees." In a few days, they'd angle the cardboard to simulate a forest slope and light the downhill side on fire. Then they'd watch it roar up the hill, record everything on high-speed cameras and study the flames' spread. The goal is to hone in on how fire moves through real forests.

Finney says fire is one of the most counterintuitive things imaginable. "Almost everything you think you know about it is probably wrong. Not just a little wrong, not just a tiny degree wrong. Exactly wrong."

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A few days after I visited Finney's office, he emailed me a recent editorial paper in the journal *Science*, called "Reform forest fire management."

The paper stated—like Finney, Pyne and many of the experts who study fire—that when

fuels in forests are controlled, fire burns at low intensity and can restore health to the forest. These low-intensity fires are akin to those that burned before the settlement of the West and the Forest Service's ensuing suppression policy. It's what ecologists have long considered beneficial fire.

*"THE PUBLIC RECEIVES DISTORTED IMAGES SHOWING ONLY THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE, OUT-OF-CONTROL FIRES."*

The Forest Service's official policy recognizes this. But the paper suggests the agency rarely allows beneficial fires to burn. In the short term, it is easier and safer to suppress all fires. Firefighters can put out 98 percent of fires at their start. The two percent that get out of control, however, become the big ones. A balanced system including more frequent burning would limit the big costly ones by robbing them of fuel.

For the Forest Service and other agencies, the risks of letting fires burn and the low tolerance for error means suppression reigns supreme. And there's always money to fight fire.

"With these deterrents, 'battling' fire and 'only you can prevent wildfire' campaigns have more traction than recognizing that many severe fires result from accrued management decisions," the paper said.



*Mark Finney, a research forester at the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory, explains how fire is a natural and necessary part of the ecosystem. Finney believes the public is ill-informed about the natural role of fire in an ecosystem. He says controlled burns are a considerably better alternative to fighting fires, opposed to the current suppression methods. (Jake Green)*

One of its co-authors, Malcolm North, is a Forest Service ecologist. According to Science, the agency asked the journal to remove North's name from the piece, saying the author's opinions differed from its own.

While change within agencies is hard, the authors believe public pressure could tip the scale. That's a hard sell when every summer the press characterizes fire as an invading army.

To fight bigger fires, the percentage of the Forest Service budget dedicated to fire suppression has increased from 16 percent in 1995 to over 50 percent this year. But all this money funneled toward suppressing fires isn't slowing them down: In terms of acreage burned, the six worst fire seasons the Forest Service has on record all occurred after 2000.

As fire seasons increase in impact, the need for in-depth coverage is growing. So too is the demand for new angles to a story with an all-too-familiar plot.

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In 2015, major newspapers ranging from the Los Angeles Times to The New York Times ran pieces about the hot dry summer in the West, the fires it sparked and its connection to climate change.

Two other events over the season brought attention to the wildfire-climate change connection. One was the Forest Service budget report. The other was repeatedly broadcast comments from California Gov. Jerry Brown. "This is the future from now on," he said of wildfire in a September 14 press conference. "It's going to get worse just by the nature of how the climate is changing."

While the science connecting climate change and increased fire threats is sound, the attention to this angle has those seeking a more sustainable fire future worried. For advocates, fire is a good way to show climate change effects in a dramatic and vivid way. As a historian, Stephen Pyne spends more time looking back at wildfire. Looking forward, he worries the story of fire will be folded into that of climate change, making plausible solutions for the first seem contingent on solving the second.

Pyne, who is frequently interviewed by media, found a strong bias this summer toward supporting the message of worse fire as a result of climate change without considering other factors. "If we allow it to be hijacked by that then we're just going to be playing whack-a-mole with fires for the next century," he said.

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There are some, however, who take a more optimistic view, hoping that fire coverage will improve as the demand for it rises.

Michael Kudas has covered fire for a decade as both a writer and photojournalist. "You used to be able to get a ride in a truck to get a pretty good angle," he recalls. Today, he is associate director at the University of Colorado Boulder's Center for Environmental Journalism.

Kudas has found that crises drive better journalism as they affect more and more people.

"We have far more communities in the West that are part of the problem but also threatened by it, so that's a natural readership for these stories."



*Public Information Officer Asano Otsu (right) shows Breanna Thomasson (left) how to create a press release for Inciweb, a government site displaying the status of all active wildfires. (Jake Green)*

Two types of journalists are rising to the task of telling a more nuanced fire story, Kodas says. One is a growing breed of journalists with backgrounds in science and environmental policy, who bring increased insight to fire. The other variety is more homegrown. Newspapers in the West cover fire every summer, and reporters who stick around long enough are left with the institutional knowledge to cover the long-term issues.

"They might not be as polished a writer or as flashy a journalist as big market people, but are by and large better at this kind of thing," Kodas says.

For Karl Puckett, the season's end showed the dual nature of fire coverage. On September 29, the front page of the Great Falls Tribune ran an article of his about a fire burning in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area called the Sheep Mountain Fire. The headline read "Doing what it should do," and the article portrayed a fire burning through fuels built up

over a century. The next time fires start in the area they won't be able to charge out of the backcountry and toward communities, Puckett's sources said.

The next day, the front page carried another Puckett article about the Sheep Mountain Fire. This one's headline was "The Great Escape." It described a guest ranch evacuation. Among the evacuees was Jack Hanna, Montana's celebrity animal show host, who was "forced to hightail it out of the woods Saturday after the Sheep Mountain Fire roared back to life."

Sometimes, breaking news is just breaking news.

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The week before the Sheep Mountain Fire made the front page, photographer Jake Green and I drove to Glacier National Park. On the phone, Puckett had told me he would be there with retired Forest Service ecologist Wayne Phillips. Puckett wanted to do a story on forest regrowth, what ecologists call "post-fire succession" in burn zones of varying age.

Under cloudless and bright fall skies we started in a forest that had burned in 2006. New lodgepole pine trees had grown to chest height, while above them the trunks of the trees killed in the fire rose bare and pointed like toothpicks.

From there we moved to the now extinguished Reynolds Creek Fire of 2015. That fire, reported July 21, closed the iconic Going-to-the-Sun Road through the park's interior, made national news and cost \$10 million to suppress.

Uphill from us the ground was black underfoot and the trees charred and dead. But in the small pocket where we stood, the forest was mostly unburnt.

In the burned area, bear grass and Oregon grape, thimbleberry and fireweed were already coming back. The blackened branches of a mountain maple rose nine feet up, its leaves burned off by the fire. New leaves rose around its base. Wayne Phillips dug up chunks of plants with connected root systems to show their ability to survive underground even as flames scorched the surface.

"What's the big picture, Wayne, for all this?" Puckett asked, interrupting. "What's the

public need to know?"

Phillips, in the roundabout and excitable way of the retiree, was trying to paint a clearer picture of fire's effects. It's why he was out there, and why he said he reached out to Puckett in the first place. He'd been reading what he called Puckett's "in-depth articles" over the course of the fire season, and brought some old photos of post-fire forests to the newsroom.

Puckett had looked at the photos and invited the ecologist on a trip to Glacier.

What Phillips thinks the public needs to know is this: "You can read in the newspaper, 10,000 acres burned. But this burned," he said, gesturing at the barely touched green area we stand in, "and that burned," waving toward the charred forest ten yards uphill.

Like the Sucker Creek Fire or even the Valley Fire, there was more to this than the destructive force in the news. The black and green mosaic of a burnt forest is just as strangely beautiful as a forest fire at night, and fire's story neither starts with the flames nor ends when they go out.

*Andrew Graham studies environmental science journalism at the University of Montana. He does not think natural history is boring.*

*Jake Green is a junior at the University of Montana. He has a passion for people and is intrigued by their stories. He enjoys digital photography but spends much of his time shooting film.*