

April 2005 | Feature Story

News the Planet Can Use

Grist.org founder Chip Giller started with 100 e-mails in 1999. Six years later, his eco-site featuring 'gloom and doom with a sense of humor' reaches 250,000 subscribers.

by Heather Nordell

Known for its tongue-in-cheek headlines, such as "No Chemical Left Behind" and "Asbestos Times, the Worst of Times" (stop and consider that one for an extra beat), the online magazine Grist is all about covering the environment from its offices in downtown Seattle.

The website has become a must-read for eco-conscious individuals, including, impressively, many loyalists in the much-sought 20- and 30-year-old sectors. What's more, it has earned kudos from environmentalist organizations and mainstream media alike.

For instance, Grist (www.grist.org) received the 2004 Jane Bagley Lehman Award from the Tides Foundation. The national award was given in recognition of the magazine's impact on environmental awareness and policymaking in the United States and its success in helping to create the next generation of environmentalists.

Another award cites "a rich mix of hard-hitting eco-political coverage, practical tips, hopeful tales and rib-tickling whimsy." In 2002, Shift magazine named Grist founder and editor-in-chief Chip Giller as one of 30 top environmental innovators in North America. The New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today have each written about Grist's unique take on environmental news.

To honor Grist's accomplishments and this month's celebration of Earth Day, EM met with Giller to discuss all things eco. This is an edited version of our conversation.

EM: What do major newspapers mean when they say Grist.org plays a 'unique' role in environmental reporting?

Giller: Grist tells the untold stories. There is no other comparable daily source of environmental news.

Our style has helped us reach Generations X and Y, people in their 20s and 30s. We expose readers to important issues and provide resources such as "Ask Umbra," an advice service, and a blog that helps people connect and take action.

We try not to be dogmatic or prescriptive.

EM: What are your three hottest issues?

Giller: Over the next year, Grist will focus significant attention on climate change, environmental justice and energy issues, all interconnected. Climate change is not just an environmental issue, but also a human rights and social justice issue.

EM: What role does the Internet play in the environmental movement and mobilizing change?

Giller: Some of the pioneering work in Internet activism



Photo by Dani Weiss

Famous fan mail for Grist

"My favorite online environmental journal is the ever-engaging Grist."
—Bill Moyers, author, journalist and all-time Evergreen Monthly hero

"Chip is smart as hell, iconoclastic, sophisticated. He has a free-swinging sense of irony. But when you dig to the inner core, as I think I have, you find someone behind all the ironic puns and the computerized coolness who is deeply worried about the future of our only planet. He has real faith in the power of information—if he can just find a way to slip it past people's defenses—to mobilize our democracy to start behaving intelligently."
—Denis Hayes, national coordinator of the first Earth Day and president of the Bullitt Foundation

"Chip is at the forefront of current environmental journalism. His vision for Grist, and the hard work that's made that vision reality, were entirely new forces in this movement. Every environmental journalist that I know of reads Grist daily; it is what shapes the debate. As for Chip, he's the real deal. He figured out early on that sanctimony is what kills the environmental discussion, and that humor and irreverence would revive it. I can't think of a more important figure for the future of American environmentalism."
—Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*

"Chip represents, and invigorates, a movement that is a new shade of green: a brighter, more savvy green, representing a generation of people in whom environmental protection has been hard-wired. The humor, candor, and honesty of his work make people want to be a part of this movement. It's fun, it's irreverent, and it's deeply personal and passionate. Grist Magazine and the work of Chip Giller are breaths of fresh air, exactly what the environment needs right now."
—Denise Joines, program officer, Wilburforce Foundation

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focused on environmental issues, particularly around [REDACTED] efforts to encourage the Clinton administration to protect wild areas in national forests. [Those efforts succeeded, only to be rebuffed by the Bush administration.]

Now, many of the most exciting ideas for progress and the most interesting debates on how to bring these ideas to fruition are occurring on the Internet. Grist offers a forum for this discussion and a home to ideas and leadership bubbling up from Generations X and Y.

The Internet is a democratizing force; debates are no longer restricted to conference rooms in D.C. or New York. Readers write to Grist.org to share promising developments in their local areas, churches and businesses. They are able to exchange thoughts and feedback with other readers in real time.

One more thing: Grist is able to post news stories as soon as they break, whether it is an important development in the Beltway or a vital story filed from Europe.

EM: Why and how did you start Grist.org?

Giller: My goal was to help lighten up a movement known for taking itself too seriously and engage an audience that might otherwise be turned off by depressing environmental news. Since the leadership and membership of many of the country's environmental groups are aging, we needed to find a new way to connect [with] Generations X and Y.

I launched Grist with Earth Day's first national coordinator Denis Hayes in 1999 with a style of "gloom and doom with a sense of humor." I began by sending e-mails to 100 of my colleagues and friends. Readership quickly grew to 1,000, then 5,000, then 10,000 and so on.

Today, 250,000 people read Grist each month, with subscribers from every U.S. state and 50 countries. Extended syndication with MSNBC.com, Salon.com, PBS.org and others reaches even more people. We have a staff of 14, plus more than 100 contributors, including many prominent environmental writers.

EM: What was your background prior to Grist.org?

Giller: I was new media director for the Earth Day Network, where I oversaw the website development for the international Earth Day 2000 campaign. Earlier, I was editor of Greenwire, the first environmental news daily in Washington D.C. The biweekly newspaper High Country News launched my start in environmental journalism. I grew up in Massachusetts and graduated from Brown University's environmental studies program.

EM: That's your past. What is on the future horizon for Grist and you?

Giller: I am focused on where the environmental movement is going. While recent political times have been tough, I have great hope in the creativity people are bringing to environmental policy, green business, and activism.

Grist's aim is to be the most influential environmental media source, informing public policy and stirring debate. Over the next year, we plan to reach even more people and expand the resources we offer.

EM: What do you do for fun?

I am obsessed with my job. I love coming to work and getting energy from the passion I share with my colleagues. I enjoy seeing how all the pieces of the environmental movement connect, and gluing together all the elements of our business. My wife Jenny and I really enjoy the outdoors. We also belong to a CSA [community-supported agriculture co-op] and enjoy cooking. And, I *love* reading the news.

EM: Who are some of your heroes?

Giller: Earth Day resulted in the Clean Air and Clean Water acts. I admire [Earth Day founder] Denis Hayes' intellect, passion and chutzpah. Progress happens in waves. I appreciate Denis sticking by his guns through many political cycles.

For 20 years, author Bill McKibben has written about environmental concerns. His impact and education around climate-change issues have reached well beyond the choir.

Harold Ward, a pioneer in introducing environmental teachings on campus, led Brown University's Center for Environmental Studies. His curriculum taught students to give back to their communities.

My parents taught me about writing, thinking critically, giving back and having high standards. We used to go to the shore of Massachusetts for two weeks every year; we did things like visit Robert Frost's cabin in Vermont. These experiences were very grounding and sparked my interest in the outdoors, where I developed a connection to nature.

EM: What advice do you give people with a burning passion to change the world?

Giller: Reach out to people about your passion and share your dream. It is likely others share your passions and beliefs. Be persistent and pursue many avenues to reaching that dream. The road you may not otherwise have taken can lead to success.

For more information, and a daily fix of environmental news, visit www.grist.org.

Heather Nordell is a regular contributor to Evergreen Monthly.

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