

Planetary Emergency and Sustainable Democracy: What Can Media and Communication Scholars Do?

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The following Commentary is an edited version of a talk at a plenary session on Reimagining Sustainability in the 21st century, at the International Association for Media and Communication Research, University of Oregon, 21 June 2018.

My perspective on the question of sustainability has been informed by four years of participation in a community-based struggle against the Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) project which massively increases the capacity of a pipeline from the Alberta tar/oil sands to a marine terminal near Vancouver, in Burnaby, where my home and University are located. Proposed by Kinder Morgan, a Texas-based energy infrastructure company founded by two former Enron executives, and supported by the governments of Canada and Alberta, the project, should it be completed, would triple the capacity of the current pipeline to 890,000 barrels of oil per day. It would increase oil tanker traffic sevenfold to 400 a year, and escalate local and regional environmental risks – oil tank farm fires in a residential area, pipeline ruptures with toxic diluents used to liquefy bitumen, tanker spills and disruption to marine life in the Salish Sea. The latter has been fundamental to age-old Indigenous ways of life and to the contemporary economy, ecology and identity of Canada's Pacific coast.

But far more than local risks are entailed. The TMX project has national and indeed global dimensions. In a visit to Vancouver to raise funds for those arrested during the civil disobedience actions, the American writer Bill McKibben described it as one of the top four environmental struggles in the world right now, associated as it is with the expansion of tar/oil sands extraction.

- Of the many complex dimensions to this nationwide struggle of global significance, I can here provide only major themes.
- Economic investments in the billions, and the promise of jobs, and of revenues to support public services.
- Canada's possible drift towards a petro-state status and its increasing subservience to foreign capital.

- Intensified tensions between Canadian regions with different political economies – especially coastal British Columbia vs petro-dependent Alberta, which is allied with the federal government.
- Ruptured relations between Ottawa and Indigenous people who have the legal and constitutional standing to be consulted about development through their territories.
- The irreconcilable contradiction between Canada’s stated climate commitments (embodied in a modest carbon tax proposal) and its actual fossil-fuel energy policies. At his Vancouver talk, McKibben argued that with 1/200th of the world’s population, Canada’s full exploitation of the Alberta Sands would unleash one-third of the carbon budget humanity has left to keep global warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius, a target that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau aggressively promoted at the 2015 Paris climate negotiations.
- The complicity of corporate news media in legitimizing and promoting export-oriented extractivism, contrasting with the vibrancy of alternative/independent media (such as the National Observer and theyee.ca) which engages with energy and environmental issues in coastal British Columbia.
- The fertility of resistance. There has been a determined anti-pipeline coalition of Indigenous people (First Nations), environmental organizations, community residents and city governments. After summer 2017, they were supported by a newly elected left-of-center government in British Columbia, backed by the Green Party thus enabling balance-of-power leverage. These organizations and parties have waged campaigns with tactics ranging from interventions at regulatory hearings and legal challenges to the approval process, to protest rallies and nonviolent civil disobedience. The resistance has had a partial victory: Kinder Morgan has abandoned TMX – but at the cost of having Canada’s government spend \$4.5 billion to purchase the pipeline and take over direct leadership of the project.

So, the struggle continues, and could use support from readers of this journal. At the very least, if you have a poster of Justin Trudeau, dip it in oil – his image as a global climate leader is a sham. If we cannot count on boyband politicians to build a sustainable society, what can we do as Communication scholars? Below I offer some reflections, in the form of a Top Ten list, in a narrative rather than prioritized sequence.

One - interrogate what we mean by ‘sustainability’

The theme of this year’s IAMCR Conference, “Reimagining Sustainability,” implicitly rejects the reduction of ecological matters to the question of climate crisis. There are other existential threats, including Artificial Intelligence, nuclear war, resource depletion, and potential pandemics.

Yet intellectually, climate crisis is a good starting point. It readily opens to questions of social structure and its governing logics. Policy analysts describe climate change as a ‘wicked problem’ – it necessitates unprecedented co-operation and demands short-term sacrifice for long-term and indeterminate benefits. And those with the most power and wealth to mitigate the problem are its chief creators and beneficiaries. Its entanglements, and its existential dangers, call for rethinking established models.

We could start by asking - What do we want to sustain? - A particular social order? Is 'sustainable development' a contradiction, a greenwashing slogan? Perhaps there are many aspects of our culture, political and economic systems that need to be replaced, not sustained.

Presumably we want to reproduce, and ensure the well-being of certain *prerequisites* of human life on Earth, and a decent *quality* of life for all people, and for future generations. Models of democracy and justice are relevant in imagining how those goals can be pursued.

Two - model a sustainable future in our own practice

It is important, ethically and politically, to demonstrate some connection between political commitments and actual practices. Without falling into the trap of carbon-shaming each other, or validating a market-based consumer-choice model of ecological rescue, we should reduce the carbon footprint of academic work, while still working collaboratively.

This is also a question of institutional accountability; we could advocate for policies like universities paying carbon offsets for work-related flights, disinvesting from fossil fuels, or providing more technical support for virtual meetings and conferences.

Three - adopt a crisis orientation

A state of planetary emergency makes it appropriate to adopt a crisis orientation for Communication studies. We could adapt and expand Robert Cox's (2007: 15-16) four ethical principles for environmental communication as a crisis discipline:

- Enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals, and to threats and opportunities, vis-à-vis the sustainability of ecosystems, human rights, responsive government and human communities.
- Make the relevant information and decision-making processes "transparent and accessible to members of the public". Those affected by environmental or other threats "should also have the resources and ability to participate in decisions affecting their individual or communities' health".
 - This concept resonates with Climate Justice as a normative benchmark – viz, those most affected by climate disruption should have a proportionately greater voice; those with the greatest resources, and/or the greatest responsibility for creating the problem, should pay a proportionately greater share of the costs.
 - These concerns are analogous with equality as a cornerstone of democratic communication. Our scholarship should help identify and offset the inequalities prevalent elsewhere in the social, economic and political system. As Robert McChesney (1999: 288) put it in one of his early books, "[u]nless communication and information are biased toward equality, they tend to enhance social inequality".
- Engage various groups to study, interact with and share experiences of the natural world – and the lifeworlds and perspectives of subaltern groups and communities.
- Critically evaluate and expose communication practices that are "constrained or suborned for harmful or unsustainable policies toward human communities and the natural world" (Cox, 2007: 15-16)

All told, these principles imply a more explicitly political and normative grounding for communication research.

Four - re-think democracy, in light of ecological crisis

In light of climate crisis as a ‘wicked problem’, our analyses ought to foreground elements of power, and its distribution and accountability. We could, for example, evaluate public communication in light of revised models of political obligation, such as that of ‘sustainable democracy’ (Hackett and Zhao, 1998: 224-225). This entails both the reproduction of democratic institutions and culture over time, but also the compatibility of governmental systems with ecological reproduction, so as to ensure that economic and social life stays within ecological limits. This implies at the very least, curtailing the voracious appetite of capital, and placing limits on what majorities can decide by constitutionally entrenching the rights of nature.

Has emphasis on the Habermasian public sphere and/or deliberative democracy led us to insufficiently attend to how power and ideology intrude in public discourse and policy? Does such an approach aspire to an impossible consensus, disarming those who need to *mobilize* for sustainability against extractivist opponents with a take-no-prisoners approach? Is it time to abandon the public sphere concept as a benchmark for research – especially liberal versions that emphasize individual rationality – and attend more to ecosocialist analyses of planetary crisis? *Monthly Review*, whose editor John Bellamy Foster is based here at University of Oregon, has taken a leading role in this respect, foregrounding questions of power, structure, conflicting interests, and the logic of capitalism.

Five - advance indigenous knowledge

Appropriately, this talk coincides with National Indigenous People’s Rights day in Canada. There is a strong movement in Canadian universities to Indigenize curricula and faculty. I sometimes worry that this could be co-opted by a state strategy, under the banner of reconciliation, to incorporate Indigenous people into the extractivist economy. I recall attending a major Reconciliation march in Vancouver in 2013; one of the co-sponsors was Enbridge, a major fossil fuel company assembling support for its (ultimately defeated) Northern Gateway pipeline from the tar Sands.

But university initiatives could be taken in a more radical direction, if indeed Indigenous rights, ethics, and struggles for justice are the best line of defence to defend land and water against a rapacious economic system that is devouring its own material base (Klein, 2014). Without engaging in essentialism, exoticization or homogenization (the features of Orientalism), attention to Indigenous conceptions of human/nature relations could help shift the culture away from extractivism, and indeed help settler colonies like Canada to redefine their sense of nationhood. Perhaps it is no coincidence that countries with the greatest legal recognition of the rights of nature, like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, have the strongest Indigenous political presence.

Six - connect environmental communication, with analyses of structural logics, and systemic social change

It is not just about media. We must consider that environmental collapse is embedded in extractivist capitalism, or capitalism more broadly, so that the possibility of sustainable human civilization depends on radical system change. We must analyze the governing logics of the (economic and

political) systems. How much change is possible within the system? What are the strategic points of leverage?

Some environmental studies scholars, while not engaging in wholesale critiques of the capitalist system, have identified the power of energy regime incumbents as an under-explored aspect of blockage to climate action (Geels, 2014). I was personally inspired by a less academic intervention – Bill McKibben’s landmark article in *Rolling Stone* (2012). He argued that the US environmental movement had a lengthy history of policy failure because it had no clear focus, grievance or villain. Rather than simply urging everyone to engage in conservation – rather like declaring war on ourselves – he nominates the fossil fuel sector as a ‘rogue industry’. His initiative led to the formation of the international environmental advocacy group 350.org and its campaign of divestment from fossil fuels. At least implicitly, McKibben was drawing upon social movement theory, particularly the resource mobilization tradition, to inform strategy and analysis. Communication scholars interested in the transformations that avoid the language of planetary catastrophe could similarly benefit from greater use of social movement theory – in contradistinction to the view that ‘great leaders’, technological innovation on its own, or the supposedly self-correcting logic of markets – are the best hopes for system change. Individually and collectively, we could make a greater effort to draw out the strategic implications of our research for sustainability politics.

Seven - support alternative media

In a landmark study, Downing et al (2001) provided numerous rationales for the relevance of radical or alternative media in communication studies. Planetary emergency provides another compelling rationale. Alternative media are arguably well-positioned to generate the kind of communication needed to challenge established power as a precondition for addressing environmental crisis. Without plunging into the intellectual rabbit hole of defining alternative media precisely, many scholars would agree on most of the relevant characteristics: oppositional content; horizontal communication with audiences regarded as co-producers rather than markets; an openness to social change and social movements; engagement with communities; participatory production processes; low levels of capitalization; independence from State and corporate control; and challenges to ‘hope gap’ that inhibits effective climate action.

The contrast between ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ media should not be overstated; there are contradictions, hybridity, ambiguities and even convergence between dominant commercial media and once-radical alternatives (Kenix, 2011). But there is accumulating evidence of persistent qualitative differences between them in terms of framing and sourcing (Gunster, 2012; Hackett et al, 2017). The Canadian west coast enjoys a particularly vibrant independent media scene, one that has contributed significantly to the cultural and political strength of environmentalism and the anti-pipeline movement. David Beers, founder of the online outlet theyee.ca, told me that its journalism is informed by a different set of questions. Instead of ‘Is the economy growing’, and ‘Who is winning in the political or economic arena’, the Tyee asks, ‘Is the economy sustainable?’ and ‘Who is left out?’

Eight - rethink and restructure journalism

The oppositional and transformative potential of genuinely ‘alternative’ journalism needs to be ramped up in the context of planetary emergency.

One of the many grotesqueries of the Trump era is that institutions of the national security state, such as the FBI with its history of political repression, are being held up as defenders of liberal-democracy. Similarly, in the media field, the Establishment press, apologists for global neoliberalism like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, are positioned almost as alternative media vis-à-vis the Trump administration and such far-right media as Breitbart and Fox News. To be sure, those allegedly ‘liberal’ media are raising critical questions about the Trump presidency from a conventional liberal-democratic standpoint. Think Russiagate. But almost nobody in either the established or far-right media has given the Trump administration’s full-scale assault on the environment sustained attention. From the viewpoint of sustainability, we cannot allow the *New York Times* and Fox News to define the boundaries of the journalistic imagination. Defining new journalism paradigms has been a popular and often fruitless pastime for several decades, but now we need to reconsider the issue in relation to system-wide ecological crisis. Research through the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives’ Climate Justice program has explored the kinds of news that might engage and empower media audiences vis-à-vis struggles for sustainability. It is more likely to be found in alternative media than in the commercially-oriented corporate press. This is a journalism that explores potential solutions, offers more hopeful and engaged visions of climate politics, positions political action as viable means of agency for those struggling to respond to climate crisis, tells stories of political success and normalizes political engagement by ordinary people. It also avoids the stultifying conflict narratives (Party A versus Party B) that reduces politics to a game between elites and insiders, and instead either finds points of common ground for forward-looking action, or highlights accessible conflicts that rouse people to action against the unsustainability of business as usual (Gunster 2012; Hackett et al, 2017).

But there is little point in constructing journalistic castles in the sand. The question of sustainability applies to journalism itself – what practices and organizational structures can nurture the kind of journalism called forth by global crisis? This is the terrain of critical political economy, and media reform. In addition to the arguments for media reform that have been made on democratic grounds (e.g. McChesney, 1999), environmental crisis provides another rationale. A corporate-owned, commercially-oriented ‘legacy’ news media system that still influences public/policy agendas, has a substantial online presence, and inhibits collective engagement with climate/environmental action.

From my own engagement in environmental politics, most activists recognize corporate media as hostile – but neither their importance, nor the possibility of changing them, registers on their radar screen. Hence, the importance of popularizing critiques of corporate media, and connecting struggles for democratic media with those for a sustainable environment (Brevini and Murdock, 2017).

Nine - recuperate the possibility of truth(s)

But revitalizing journalism – as the timely reporting of truths on matters of public concern – requires a cultural project even more challenging than media reform.

Contemporary society, especially the US, is facing a ‘truth emergency’, with two related dimensions: first, a disconnection between reality and beliefs, a rampant willingness to believe that which is convenient, rather than to respect evidence-based knowledge; and second, the drowning of publicly shared knowledge under a wave of competing cognitive universes.

Over recent years, I have often wondered whether communication scholarship has been complicit in the cynical dismissal of fact and science, by climate change deniers – and in politics more broadly.

Has the reduction of discourse to power in postmodernist and poststructuralist theorizing helped pave the way for dismissing truth-claims in general, generating anti-scientism, and political cynicism – if truth is irrelevant, all that matters is winning. Kurt Anderson (2017) put it provocatively: “Post-modern intellectuals...turned out to be useful idiots for the American right.”

Worried whether my own work on journalism’s ‘regime of objectivity’ (Hackett and Zhao, 1998) had overdone the exposés of hidden ideologies to the extent of denying the very possibility of truth, I reviewed a chapter on epistemology, co-authored with Nick Dyer-Witford. I was relieved to be reminded that we argued against Positivism (faith in the undistorted representation of an objectively existing world through the careful observation of facts), but also against Conventionalism – a position expressed cheekily by John Hartley (in O’Sullivan et al, 1994: 259) as a view of reality as “the sense or product of discourse”. It is this full ‘discourse’ position that leads to a self-negating epistemological relativism.

Instead, we argued for Critical Realism, which Mosco (1996: 2) defines as a view of “existence as mutually constituted by both sensory observation and explanatory practices”. Knowledge is socially constructed, but that does not mean the world can be reduced to discourse. By establishing causal links between deep structures and surface appearances, we can produce knowledge of the real, which makes its transformation possible.

We should also worry about the decline of a shared public reality and conversely, the rise of antagonistic cognitive and emotive universes amongst the citizenry. Here is another dilemma for critical communication scholars: does the critique of the exclusions, silences and repressions in supposedly ‘universal’ public spheres end up justifying every crackpot alternative? (I recall a student who used the concept of hegemony to identify pedophiles as an oppressed minority!)

Is today’s seemingly chaotic ‘social media’ landscape more sustainably democratic than was the television network oligopoly of yesteryear? Arguably, political and cultural division seems to be exacerbated by technology. Examples include Facebook algorithms and social media that enable ‘individuated encounters with the news that confirm biases and sieve out contravening facts’ (Foer, 2018, p. 16), manipulated video clips that deceive our senses into hearing people say what they never said, and – coming soon to a brain near you – Virtual Reality which by definition confuses us about what is real. It could be used productively, for example to convey the experiences and suffering of people distant from ourselves, including those afflicted by the ravages of climate change in the global South. This would put a human face to abstract notions like Climate Justice – but that is not likely to be the technology’s dominant use, is it?

As Franklin Foer puts it:

Few individuals will have the time or perhaps...capacity to sort elaborate fabrication from truth. Our best hope may be outsourcing the problem, restoring cultural authority to trusted validators with training and knowledge: newspapers, universities (2018: 18).

Ten - promote the role of public intellectual

Creating a public world that is both evidence-based and pluralistic is presumably an essential task of democratic journalism – the ‘crisis of journalism’ matters so much.

But such concerns also require a cultural rescue mission for universities. This is a reason why the Right has campaigned long and hard to persuade us that academia is threatened by ‘political correctness’ – a very useful trope for those who want to maintain existing patterns of privilege. But a

bigger threat arises from the corporatization of universities (funding sources, management techniques), and the treating of students as consumers rather than learners.

Genuine sustainability is inherently political, and threatening to powerful interests. In the context of planetary emergency, it's all the more important to defend universities as reasonably independent 'validators' of knowledge. Such a role requires changing incentives, in order to revitalize the role of the public intellectual. In North America, universities seem to be under-represented compared to other agencies of cultural production (policy institutes, book publishing, long-form journalism, proselytizing religion, documentary film-making) in generating public intellectuals. Can we reduce the pressure to keep churning out papers on narrowly measurable topics, after which the reader's only reasonable response is 'So what'? Can we stop the drift of other social sciences towards the sterile modeling of neoclassical economics?

Encouraging scholarship that both addresses urgent issues and has public resonance means stable public funding, reducing the precarity of academic labour for so many university employees, and reinforcing the interconnected institutions of tenure and academic freedom. As a gold standard definition, check out the Canadian Association of University Teachers' statement on academic freedom. This is not just about the institutional autonomy of the university from corporations and state. It also entails freedom for individual professors within their institutions, to conduct and publish research, engage in service to the community, and to express opinions about the institution itself (CAUT, n.d.).

In fighting for those ideals in the academic workplace, particularly through faculty unions, we are helping to advance the institutional prerequisites for positive contributions to a sustainable civilization.

As the Tsleil-Waututh nation puts it, in regard to their battle against Kinder Morgan's tar Sands pipeline through Coast Salish territory, it's time to 'warrior up'.

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