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Media Literacy and the Environment

Some events stand out as bellwethers of the environmental movement that took shape in the last decades of the 20th century: the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the controversy that swirled around it; the full-page advertisements that the Sierra Club published in the *New York Times* in 1966 to decry the planned building of two dams in the Grand Canyon, and the subsequent threat by the IRS to revoke the Club's non-profit status; and the burning of the Cuyahoga River in 1969.

One of these examples is not like the others. In the first two cases, individual humans are clearly depicted as advocates speaking on behalf of the environment. The symbolic resonance of the burning of the Cuyahoga River, on the other hand, was constructed out of a long series of events, many of them mediated.

Oil slicks on the Cuyahoga had burned on an irregular basis since 1868. In the 1930s, news stories about burnings focused on inadequate fire protection, rather than the pollution in the river itself. In the July 1969 fire, the Cleveland fire chief was not called, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published a brief story in the C section the next day without photographs. But Cleveland mayor Carl Stokes was determined to bring attention to the river's longstanding neglect. The state of Ohio had rarely appropriated funds for river cleanup efforts, and the state Water Pollution Control Board continued to issue permits to polluting industries as the city lost its court case attempting to enforce local ordinances. Congress had mandated remediation efforts for Lake Erie, but had never appropriated the funds. Stokes held a press conference in front of a railroad trestle burnt by the fire, and read aloud a litany of the promises made by local, state and federal officials.

Stokes' efforts might have languished in an earlier era, but the "issue attention cycle" for environmentally-oriented news stories reached a peak in that year. Among other things, the legislation that eventually became known as the Clean Water Act was under consideration at the time. *Time* and *National Geographic* stories followed--with photos from an earlier, more destructive fire on the Cuyahoga in 1952. The caption for the photo in the *Time* story read, "Some river! Chocolate brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows" (quoted in Neuzil, *The Environment and the Press*, 194). By August 1969, the Department of the Interior threatened six industrial firms with fines if they did not reduce their dumping into the river. Thus, the Cuyahoga River had to be socially mediated and re-constructed over a time period lasting decades before it could be physically restored.

In other words, environmental communication is a field that straddles many disciplines--media studies, advertising, marketing and public relations; history, political science, economics, and environmental sciences. Yet, as the example of the Cuyahoga River demonstrates, the principle of media construction provides a powerful key to understanding the field as a whole. And this example points to the urgent need for media literacy skills in the present. The

principle of media construction and other key media literacy concepts make it possible for students and adults alike to critically examine environmental news at a time when the stakes of environmental policy decisions could not be higher.

In this issue of *Connections* we present two research articles which discuss the limits and possibilities of environmental communication in two differing formats, with differing purposes: the reporting of environmental news, and environmental advocacy campaigns. In our resources section, we offer a listing of some of the top environmental news blogs. And in our MediaLit Moment, your middle school students will discern the difference between informational and advertising messages about environmental issues.

Research Highlights

Environmental Reporting: Some Limits and a Few Possibilities

Since the advent of the printing press, people have published works to speak for themselves, and have constructed media to advance their human understanding of the world. So who speaks for nature? In his dissenting opinion in the 1972 case of *Sierra Club v. Morton*, former Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas famously defended the right of inanimate nature to have a 'voice' in court when its livelihood is affected. In general, the act of speaking about--and especially "for"--the environment is fraught with contradictions and problems. Nowhere is this more painfully apparent than in the reporting of environmental news.

In news reporting, nature is much like a celebrity with a fickle public and a long shelf life. According to news theorist Anthony Downs, environmental reporting has undergone a number of 'issue attention cycles' since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Environmental reporting peaked once more with the Exxon Valdez disaster of 1989. Numbers of stories declined again during the Clinton presidency, and did not recover until the re-election of George W. Bush, when conflicts between Bush-appointed environmental officials and major environmental organizations garnered attention. Remarkably, environmental news stories have only gained in currency from 2006 to the present, due at least in part to increasing awareness of the problems posed by global warming. Today, newsstands are filled to overflowing with "green" cover issues for a wide variety of general interest magazines, from *Time*, *Glamour* and *Vanity Fair* to *Outside* and *Sports Illustrated* (Cox, *Environmental Communication*, 154).

Other problems attend the reporting of environmental news. News reporting tends to focus on specific, if not sensational events such as major oil spills and widespread release of toxic chemicals into local watersheds. And yet, problems such as the loss of biodiversity, climate change and other threats to human health and ecological systems are less visible and may go unnoticed for years or even decades. In general, environmental issues do not lend themselves well to traditional news criteria such as prominence, timeliness, conflict, impact, and magnitude (Cox, *op. cit.*, 160-161). In fact, online environmental news sources, which are not bound to strict observance of traditional news criteria, are much more likely to produce sustained, in-depth reporting on environmental topics (see our resources section for more).

The political economy of news media also can make the reporting of environmental news problematic. For example, at the opening of the 21st century, General Electric was the owner of NBC television and its business channel CNBC. In 2002, the EPA required GE to create a plan for removal of PCB's that the company had dumped in the Hudson River between 1947 and 1977. NBC news programs offered little coverage of the mandated cleanup (Mann, "Bringing good things to life?").

And, unfortunately, many environmental news stories are lacking in technical accuracy because most news organizations do not have journalists on staff who have any background or training in environmental sciences. Academic initiatives may be filling the breach. For

example, the Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media aims "to foster dialogue among climate scientists, journalists, policymakers, and the public," and "provides working journalists with essential background knowledge and context to better report the issue" (yaleclimateforum.org).

Limitations and Possibilities of Environmental Advocacy

While environmental advocacy organizations have clearly benefited from the increased attention which mainstream media have paid to environmental issues in the last several years, many have been struggling to make their calls to action more effective. Some have been confronting the limitations of previous initiatives which addressed audiences as consumers, and encouraged them to make incremental changes in their consumption patterns and lifestyles--so much so that Tom Crompton, Change Strategist for World Wildlife Fund UK spearheaded a 2008 report which argued at length that communications campaigns modeled on product marketing campaigns should be shelved in favor of campaigns which appeal to more basic values.

Crompton presents evidence that the extrinsic motivations characteristic of a market-oriented approach, such as individual financial rewards or social recognition, are less likely to lead to pro-environmental behavior. The same evidence suggests that more intrinsic motivations, such as personal growth, emotional intimacy or community involvement are more likely to lead to pro-environmental behavior (7). In a related argument, Crompton calls for an approach that draws from political strategy rather than marketing, where the emphasis is on framing a political project in terms of the values that underpin it, rather than constantly molding the project to reflect the results of focus-group research (6).

In their essay, "Winning the Conversation: Framing and Moral Messaging in Environmental Campaigns," Matthew Nisbet and his colleagues explore this argument in greater depth. They suggest that such campaigns are effective because they appeal to universal moral intuitions such as those proposed by University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt: Harm vs. Care, Fairness vs. Cheating, Loyalty vs. Betrayal, Authority vs. Subversion, Liberty vs. Oppression, and Sanctity vs. Degradation.

Nisbet and his colleagues are most inspired by the success of the anti-tobacco campaigns of the late 20th century. Both tobacco companies and smokers were morally stigmatized when the focus of attention shifted from the personal health effects of smoking to the harms cigarette smoke posed to innocent bystanders, namely children. The campaign not only framed the issue as a matter of public health, but also motivated audiences with the moral intuition of Harm vs. Care. Soon the campaign led to greater public demand for bans on cigarette smoking in public spaces, cigarette taxes, and restrictions on tobacco sales and marketing (23).

In 2010, Environmental Defense Fund director Fred Krupp, in response to the collapse of the cap-and-trade carbon emissions bill before Congress, applied just such a frame to the issue of

climate change. In this case, the public health frame emphasized the potential of climate change to increase the incidence of infectious diseases, asthma, allergies, heat stroke and other health problems, especially among children and the elderly. This frame made the issue more personally relevant to new audiences, and it shifted the imagined geographic location of the problem in the minds of audiences, replacing visuals of remote Arctic regions, animals and peoples with more socially proximate neighbors and places across local communities and cities.

Nisbet and his colleagues were also able to point to two studies affirming the effectiveness of this campaign strategy. In the first study, even those doubtful or dismissive of climate change were willing to support local policy actions. In the second, addressing climate change in terms of benefits to public health activated positive emotions of hope among those who had previously been disengaged, and even appeared to diffuse common reactions of anger among those who were otherwise dismissive (22-23).

Environmental communication is often called a "crisis discipline," given the many challenges the field addresses. It's a rapidly changing field, but it's also clear that framing and moral messaging--which are particular methods for constructing media--will remain indispensable tools for successful communications practitioners.



CML Participates in Speaker Series

River's Edge, a wellness retreat center in Cleveland, OH, sponsored a day-long workshop March 21st addressing sensationalized news. CML's Tessa Jolls was invited to participate in the 2015 Speaker Series. Her workshop explored media literacy principles and offered practice in applying them to news media experiences in an effort to become more conscious consumers and generators of news.



NAMLE Conference 2015
June 26-27 in Philadelphia, PA

[Register here](#)

CONSORTIUM
for **MEDIA LITERACY**

Uniting for Development

About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communications that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth. <http://consortiumformedia literacy.org>

Resources for Media Literacy

Recommended Environmental News and Information Blogs

Greenwashing Index (<http://www.greenwashingindex.com>)

According to the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, companies engage in greenwashing when they spend more time and money claiming to be green through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact. This is a good source for encouraging your students to discuss, analyze, and debate greenwashed ads, and may even inspire them to create showcases of good and bad ads.

Grist (grist.org)

Now in its 15th year, Grist serves up hearty portions of environmental news and analysis, and features sections on architecture, lifestyle and more.

On Earth (onearth.org)

On Earth, the Natural Resources Defense Council's environmental news magazine, offers commentary, analysis and up-to-date national and international environmental news, and it doesn't shy away from discussion of local and regional issues, either.

New York Times Dot Earth Blog (<http://www.dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com>)

Venerable *New York Times* environmental reporter Andrew Revkin has a wide-ranging curiosity, good knowledge of the field, and many source contacts to draw from.

New York Times Science News--Environment Section

<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/science/earth/index.html>

Features up-to-the-minute reporting on issues of environmental concern

The Guardian environment blog (<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog>)

The Guardian has a stable of seasoned environmental bloggers stationed in all continents across the globe (well, except for Antarctica).

Mother Jones Blue Marble blog (<http://www.motherjones.com/blue-marble>)

Left-leaning but thorough environmental reporting, often with an emphasis on environmental hazards to consumers.

Yale Environment 360 (<http://www.e360.yale.edu>)

This blog builds a richly diverse ecosystem of environmental news and information. It features stories from across the globe on a very wide array of topics, and approaches them as subjects for reporting, analysis, problem-solving and debate.

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MediaLit Moments

Your Date with Fossil Fuels?

Energy industry public relations campaigns can be a hit-and-miss proposition. An amateur journalist might be able to spot the stock photographs that the coal industry used to create the image that everyone in the region supports coal miners and mining. But, other communications might be very sophisticated. During the Beijing Olympics of 2008, GE aired a CG animation ad in its 'Ecomagination' series in which a crane takes flight along a beautiful Chinese coastline and transforms into a jumbo jet. Others wait patiently in line for take-off while sea turtles (i.e., ground traffic) cross the pristine beach. The narration prompts audiences to "imagine a way to fly that not only helps save millions of gallons of fuel, but actually reduces emissions." The metaphorical power of the images and the short duration of the ad make it likely that audiences will forget to ask how such technical advances might be achieved. In this MediaLit Moment, your middle level students will evaluate an energy industry ad which hinges on a single device: the personification of the fossil fuels industry itself.

Ask students to evaluate the effectiveness of an energy industry message

AHA! This video talks about an important environmental issue, but it's still trying to win me over to the advertiser's point of view.

Grade Level: 6-8

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

Core Concept #5: Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power

Materials: Computer with high-speed internet connection, LCD projector and screen. Advertisement from the Environmental Policy Alliance, "Breaking Up with Fossil Fuels Is Hard to Do," at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A6j1r3Kbuo>

Activity: Ask students if they can recall any energy industry ads they've seen in the recent past. How did they react to them? Why? Screen the fossil fuels ad at least twice. What did they like about the ad. What didn't they like? Did they find it persuasive? Why or why not? Discuss the corresponding relationship between the character of Joe and themselves as audiences for the ad. What did it mean for them to be on a "date" with fossil fuels? How did they react to that? Did they find this use of personification persuasive? Why or why not?

Extended Activity: Using this advertisement and any other examples as source materials for analysis and reflection, ask students to construct what they believe to be a persuasive pro-industry ad. Note: the GE ad mentioned above ad can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2JUFTU5Lhg>

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, ©2002-2015.