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The World Wide Web and the Moderation of the Environmental Movement

Environmentalists are using the web and other forms of digital media, especially social media, to promote a new vision of sustainable development that includes job creation and working *with* businesses, instead of against them, to help save the environment. The environmental movement, since the arrival of the World Wide Web (WWW), has become more moderate and mainstream than it was before, when people viewed environmentalists as members of a fringe subculture, ignorant of economic issues that appeal to average voters.

The environmental movement first began out of the conservation era of the late 19th and early 20th century, lead by such people like John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, whose purposes was to preserve forests and parks. The first wave outside of the conservation movement came in around the time of the mid 1960s. This wave focused on protest methods, non violent disobedience through groups like Greenpeace to raise awareness on various new issues including pollution and pesticides. Both the conservation movement and first wave of environmentalists were characterized as not mainstream in old media (print, radio and television) but rather as subcultures that are romanticizing poetic, relating to Warner's ideas that "Counter publics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poetics of scene making will be transformative not replicative" ("Publics and Counter Publics in Public Culture," 2002). Often on newscasts whenever environmental issues were present, they focused on those who where at rallies tied to fences protesting the latest injustice against the government, or instead, focusing on chasing down oil tankards. The methods of persuasion controlled by the media gave the perception that environmentalists were a fringe group a various subculture that was not apart of mainstream society as noted by McLuhan. "This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any

medium—that is an extension of ourselves- result from the new scales that's been introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology” (“Understanding the Media, Extensions of Man,” 1964). This relates to Marshall McLuhan's idea that the “medium is the message” in terms of framing of how the media can control and frame a message and make the public perceive a person, culture, or an issue. McLuhan said that “the medium is the message”. McLuhan's view of the “medium is the message” also ties in with what Walter Benjamin says in terms of the audience. He views the audience as the camera in what they see, and what is given, noting that “the public is an examiner but an absent-minded one” (“The Work of the Art in the Age of Mechanical Production in *Illuminations*,” 1969). How the medium controlled the message as well as how the crowd view what they saw both impact with what environmentalists were perceived as. They were perceived as nothing more than a fringe radical subculture that could not get the environmental debate on the table many times in the pre WWW days.

Just as the first wave of environmentalism was ending and the next wave was starting, which was around the late 1980s and early 1990s. The WWW was starting to come into play, when Tim Berners Lee invented the first web page in 1991. Little did Tim Berners Lee know, that invention of the WWW would help sphere head a revolution in media communication. The WWW, as a new technology, would help change the methods of persuasion for the environmental movement. Acting as environmentalists through the lens of perception by radio, television and newspaper (which was not as accessible to most activists), the web made it possible for them to get there message across in a more clear, and professional manner.

The important opportunity with the WWW as the medium of the message gave environmentalists more of a voice. They now could use tools such as streaming video, and scrolling text to engage people on the issues. This branches on the idea that new media is in reality new media, which Marshall McLuhan noted. The idea was that now environmentalists were now forced to change

their message to get their point across in order to get more people along for the ride. Using the foundations of the Web like YouTube videos, Facebook, and blogs (electronic journals), and hypertexts (electronic print) relates to Henry Jenkins idea of the convergence of new and old media in *Convergence Culture*.

The idea of “convergence culture” can be defined simply as: “Where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Pg. 2). This convergence culture of the foundations of old media are new, and changed the tune of many older environmental groups in trying to broaden their reach to engage people. Newer groups used the WWW to promote moderate environmental issues rather than just protesting. For example Greenpeace, while still known for its non violent radical tactics in recent years has actually produced some more moderate material. This includes environmentally friendly electronic reports and policy engagement on alternative energy, which in pre WWW days was unlikely. Greenpeace in the pre-WWW days would have been unlikely to get the word across since power was controlled by large corporations in print, television, and radio. Environmental groups, in this case, being the role of the consumer and of the media producer did not intersect.

Now the WWW allowed Greenpeace (greenpeace.org) to produce their own advocacy more inexpensively and interact, to traditional media outlets, and to get them more positive press. The same thing can be pointed to Al Gore's RePower America (repoweramerica.org) campaign. Their group is more moderate than Greenpeace with its aim of lobbying for one hundred per cent clean energy for the United States by 2018 (Al Gore, 2008). The RePower America campaign, unlike Greenpeace, uses policy bread and butter issues, besides concern for the environment. This includes economic and security concerns, not climbing up walls and or protesting. Examples of how they engage people include first, YouTube videos with regular people discussing why they want clean energy jobs, and

second a video about a Michigan oil spill using television clips from various networks in the area, using old media to promote new media.

Both the Greenpeace and RePower America examples of convergence culture of the collision course of old and new media relates also to both Roger Silverstone's view on technology and tying it in with McLuhan's Global Village. Silverstone notes in *Why Study the Media* that technology is weaved into everything we do. Silverstone notes that newer technologies like the WWW do transform the spaces citizens engage in (P. 19).

This broadens the scope and viewership of what people view, while the Global Village expands our senses, because technology is an extension of who we are. It is in the case of both Greenpeace and RePower America, where the transformation of space and time, and the extension of a person's senses have allowed citizens to engage more on the environmental issue. At the same time it is made more than just about the environment, but also an economic issue. Everyone in the world is concerned, as it is a globalization issue within the Global Village. The WWW have made environmentalists look at the need to make it more than just a fringe subculture issue, while moderating their methods of persuasion, and issues. This has been seen with Greenpeace to less of an extent, and more so with RePower America.

However, it may be noticed that environmental issues have become more prominent since the beginning of the WWW, and have come out of a perceived fringe subculture. Critics, while noted they have made gains in awareness of the issues, pointed out they have become a part of the system of commoditisation in which they have stated why the planet is in danger. One can use the example of Ethical Funds (ethicalfunds.com), a socially responsible investing company that promotes green investing. The company invests in green companies, while at the same time uses its proxy votes to change the behaviour of polluting corporations to be green. This would relate to what Adorno and Horkheimer would say about the culture industry and how people are doing the work of capitalism by

consuming. ("The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", 1944).