

The World Wide Web and the Moderation of the Environmental Movement

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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. By showing the evolution of early conservationists and environmentalists in the print, radio and television era to the movement after the start of the WWW, it will give precedence as to how the environmentalists have become mainstream.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Environmental Movement Before the WWW

The green movement had its very simple beginning in nature and wildlife. People like John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, James Audubon and George Perkins did not have that many vehicles of persuasion, that there are today, namely the WWW, television, and Radio. Print for them was the only way of getting their ideas across. George Perkins released his book in 1861, which was the first publically well known book about green issues. Teddy Roosevelt as a mud raking journalist wrote numerous exposes on corruption; Audubon did various paintings on nature (Chowder: *Drawn From Nature*, PBS) while John Muir had written works devoted to the same subject (Miller: *John Muir: Magnificent Tramp*). These people formed a base of what would be perceived amongst environmentalists as a culture of their own, a subculture, of that time, many people outside of this realm would remain a subculture until the start of the WWW. Not much was talked about within the conservation movement about persuading people about environmental economics as a way to improve living standards, nor ideas of creating industries to mitigate damage were a part of the message amongst conservationists. They normally focused on persuading the public opinion by engaging people

on simple pleasures like, conserving forests, protecting birds, and keeping waters clean. These were not hard issues however that were not in the vocabulary in the mid 1860's like sustainable development, alternative energy and sustainable investing.

This simplistic way of going about persuading public opinion brought out such subcultures like environmentalism was at the time. Michael Warner, would say that environmentalists “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*). Conservationism and early environmentalism's poetic and romantic context, tied in very nicely with print media in ways that promoted this subculture. John Audubon, whose time as a hunter allowed him to paint many wonderful paintings of birds, animals and nature. He was born to a rich family in Haiti and immigrated to the United States with his family, according to Chowder. He spent 18 years analyzing each bird, creating paintings of them and then selling his work as a subscription, educating people about the bird population. John Muir, according to Miller, had written many volumes of nature writing during this time, contributing to the context of the early environmental movement. Muir was noted to write many journals and republish them as narrative books devoted to these concerns

While Muir and Audubon where able to get their works out with books on each of their special concern, these two examples showed why environmentalism in its earliest form only catered to those who were hopelessly romantic with birds, nature and forests, and had a passion to protect natural resources. They did not have financing like print media barons to get their work out in the mainstream media to persuade the majority of people on the concerns of what was going on, nor was the technology like the WWW available at the time to voice their concerns to a wider audience. It thickened the early mix of conservationist subculture, which until then only appealed to a certain audience.

As the 19th century moved into the 20th century, radio was also added as a medium and it added another potential tool to promote their cause. However, the issues of the early conservation and early environmental movements really stayed the same until after World War II (WWII). Nothing new really was brought to the forefront until after soldiers came home. One of the longest periods of economic boom and the expansion of television brought a new way of persuasion and perception to the environmental movement, which despite hopes that it would gain a major foothold on mainstream society, even pushed it further into a fringe subculture.

During this period after WWII, many books were published that were brought out to sound the alarm linking consumption with increased environmental damage. This included Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which discussed the links of chemicals, poisoning the environment. More radical environmental groups like Greenpeace tied in with the consumerist society that grew after WWII, provided pamphlets on issues and encouraged non-violent protest methods including taking over ships, putting banners on tall buildings as examples of the attempts to gain public sympathy and persuasion on the environment. However, despite the best attempts of old media like books *Silent Spring* brought little mainstream attention, it was television that caught the attention of how people perceived environmentalists as a radical group.

While it may be the earlier parts of conservationists and very early environmentalists before the television came into households was a subculture that only catered to a specific group of people. Warner's theory could also go further to describe the first wave of environmentalists like Greenpeace and activists in general as a fringe group subculture that, specifically catered to the hard core dark green activists and not main-stream society. The television's influence on how people perceived environmentalism during this period ties in with Marshal McLuhan's "Medium is the message", where he mentions that "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).

McLuhan's theory would likely be right as television showed the extension of what groups like Greenpeace did in environmental activism making the issue a fringe subculture, as it could be seen through what the audience sees. If the audience sees what they see through the lens of the television, then, they will likely not have a positive perception on environmentalism. This can relate to the theories of Walter Benjamin and how people perceive something, saying “the public is an examiner but an absent-minded one” (1969, 217-252). Television controlled the persuasion of environmental issues. Green groups, while attempting to expose a bigger picture like energy concerns, were caught because television framed these issues as fringe. Environmentalists, in the period between the end of WWII until the late 1980s and early 1990s, may have gained some footholds, but the tools of rhetoric were largely owned by the large media conglomerates. However, as the Cold War came to an end, a new tool would potentially allow environmentalists to get some equal playing time to get their message across, while at the same time, potentially toning down radical methods of action.

The Environmental movement after the WWW

The late 1980s saw many quick changes, including the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, as the signifying the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and the rise of globalization. In terms of environmental issues, some things were changing within green issues and the movement in general. More emphasis was put into tying the importance of economics to environmental concerns. The Bruntland Commission in 1987 encouraged the idea of “sustainable development which was defined by the commission as “development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Barland, Kaj, 2004).

While the Bruntland Commission partially emphasized change, the persuasion of the

environmental message, to the broader audience, was about to change as well. Tim Berners-Lee created the first ever website in August 1991, the same year that the fall of the Soviet Union occurred. This was the big push for environmentalists to promote a global platform.

Before the creation of the WWW, environmental groups had their message constrained by print and were able to cater to a niche crowd. Activists did not have as much access to such mediums like newspaper, print, and television, or the capital to purchase this was quite high. Now, the Internet and the WWW is the new technology that was presented to them through the work of such innovative people like Berners-Lee. This now would allow them to get their message out in a more professional and clearer manner while catering to a larger audience, thanks to the new technologies that made presentation more cost effective.

Environmentalists could now use tools like hypertext, and streaming video to engage more people. In reality, the new media was built on the foundations of old media, in which McLuhan dearly notes. The message was forced to be changed. Using such foundations of the WWW including YouTube, Facebook, blogs (electronic journals) and hypertexts was the convergence of old media into new, which Henry Jenkins in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture* discusses.

Jenkins defined “convergence culture” 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” (2). The ideas that Jenkins provides with “convergence culture” where the WWW is an extension of old media ties in with the idea McLuhan presents with “Global Village” and an extension of our senses, as well as time and space (Understanding Media, 1964), and why we are all connected into a village, where we can plug, play, share and debate ideas.

The ideas of “convergence culture” and the “global village” where we are all connected, with this new technology of the WWW have changed the way messages were presented by environmental

groups. The WWW, as mentioned before, gave them new ways to send their message out, while at the same time changing not only the perception they had, but also toning down the fringe subculture tone they often presented. This relates to what technology does to a society or a group as Roger Silverstone mentions in his 1999 book *Why Study the Media*. In his book, Silverstone notes that newer technologies like the WWW do transform the spaces citizens engage in (19). He also mentions the importance of technology's persuasion and how it influences society and vice versa, saying "Our media especially, have extended range and reach, granting us infinite power but also changing the environment in which that power is exercised" (20).

The reach of the WWW has effected how the environmental movement and its message presents itself can be seen in various different examples from groups that use the WWW to persuade the public to get them to support their ideas. One of these groups, Greenpeace, which has been known for radical tactics in the past and now, but also recently published more mainstream material. There is the moderate groups like RePower America and Green for All, while also having concerns for environmental issues they mix energy issues(RePower America) and creating "green collar jobs" for lower to middle income people (Green for All).

Greenpeace (greenpeace.ca/.org), according to the website was founded in 1971 in Vancouver British Columbia by a few concerned activists who went on a boat to witness underground nuclear bomb testing in Alaska. Such tactics like chasing this activity on a boat, and non violent acts of disobedience have raised concerns of environmental abuses. They drew on the errors of mainstream society as they were perceived to be a fringe subculture who where too far radical for the average citizen. However, as the WWW in the early 1990's started to become available, Greenpeace, was a very good example of how it made become slightly more moderate then earlier forms.

While the group still has been known to do non violent disobedient acts, including climbing up

the walls of Parliament Hill in Ottawa December of 2009 to protest what they saw was the lack of Canada to do more on climate change before the Copenhagen UN conference on Climate Change, the organization through this medium has done lots to promote more topics that would interest those of mainstream society. Because of the global village the web represents, their tactics are broadened. One can point out to their *Guide to Greener Electronics*, which is published annually. The purpose of the guide is to raise awareness of what is made into consumer electronics, which have become increasingly more inexpensive and popular among society. They gave Nokia the greenest rating while Nintendo the worst. Greenpeace, now with the cost effectiveness of the WWW it can provide a lens of their own to get their message across, while not being as far radical as mainstream media may have perceived them to be before the WWW days.

This relates to Henry Jenkins *Convergence Culture* chapter entitled “Quentin Tarantino Star Wars in which fans will have a say in how media is produced and consumed noting that “In a world of ever-expanding media options, there is going to be a struggle for viewers the likes of which corporate media has never seen before” (173). While Jenkins may have been talking about large corporations and the need for them to listen to people in order to survive in the WWW age, this theory could be applied to such fringe subculture, radical environmental groups like Greenpeace, in terms of listening to mainstream society and providing more than just protesting and scaling up walls, but rather provide more interesting and mainstream environmental concerns, as mentioned with the *Guide to Greener Electronics*

While Jenkins theory can explain the moderating to an extent Greenpeace, Repower America, from the beginning, has been more moderate than Greenpeace and uses the tools of the WWW to do so. Unlike Greenpeace, which uses a mixture of radical tactics of direct action and the rare moderate idea like the *Guide to Greener Electronics*, RePower America focuses on lobbying for one hundred per cent clean energy for the United States by 2018 (Al Gore, 2008). The group focuses on policy bread and

butter issues, besides concern for the environment. The campaign focuses on economic and security concerns, not climbing up walls and/or protesting. They use these bread and butter issues that matter to most Americans to engage them on environmental issues, rather than direct action like Greenpeace often still uses. Examples of this include: YouTube videos with regular people discussing why they want clean energy jobs, and a video about a Michigan oil spill using television clips from various networks in the area, using old media to promote new media.

RePower American started in 2008 after a speech Al Gore made on the need to get the United States off of fossil fuels within ten years, by 2018. The idea came out of the group The Alliance for Climate Protection back in 2006, the same year in which the hit documentary on climate change, *An Inconvenient Truth*, won Best Documentary at the Oscars that year. Along with using the Internet and movies, Gore has also tied in books related to RePower America and The Alliance for Climate Protection, with books like the 2009 *Our Choice*, which provides solutions to the climate crisis (i.e. investing in alternative energy and smart grids) and the 2006 book *An Inconvenient Truth*, a companion to the movie. Tying that along with the television network Gore partially owns, Current TV where at a 2008 Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Conference, he showed off the winning ad for the RePower America campaign that was used on the television station. Gore and RePower America are using both old and new media to engage those who do not use the WWW often and those who use it frequently on environmental issues.

This ties in with Jenkins, with his views on trans-media story telling and franchising. Jenkins notes that “a good trans-media franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media,” (P.98) and “In the ideal form of trans-media storytelling, each medium does what it does best so that a story might be introduced in a film, expand through television, novels, and comics.” (P.98).

By using trans-media storytelling, Gore has not only helped to moderate the message of green, making it more relatable to people, while at the same time creating a franchise in the context of books and movies, and Internet widening the message and even allowing people to help create the winning ad for RePower America which was seen on Current television. Jenkins even mentions the Current TV example of using the WWW to help reach a broader audience, content came from users from the current website. (251-53).

While RePower America uses bread and butter issues like security and job creation, to engage citizen's mainstream citizens, another moderate group, Green For All, uses the persuasion of the WWW to engage mainstream society on green and economic issues, but also engages those who might be disadvantaged due to economic or ethnic background. The organization was founded in 2007. According to the 2009 annual report the group "is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans through a clean energy economy. The national organization works in collaboration with the business, government, labour, and grassroots communities to create and implement that increase quality jobs and opportunities in green industry- all the while holding the most vulnerable people at the center of its agenda" (P.3).

The organization does an effective job of using the "medium as the message" of the WWW to get their point across linking bread and butter issues of job creation with environmental issues, as well as promoting racial equality. For example, the website talks about many of its achievements of green jobs in lower income neighbourhoods across the United States, including lobbying for communities of color in lower income neighbourhoods to be players in the green energy economy. The organization also has a training program for college students to be leaders in the green economy in low income areas. By persuading the public through the WWW by linking environmental, poverty and race issues, Green For All, has attracted lots of attention and gained some various powerful donors, which include, HSBC Bank and Google (2009 Annual Report). Through the persuasion of the WWW, Green For All,

brings attention to the issue of eco-equality.

Green For All, using the persuasion of the WWW, have also helped bring more common words and terms that were not very apparent in dictionaries about 10 years ago. For example the term “Green Collar Economy” was not very apparent in the year 2000. But through the climate crisis and the WWW, it has now become a part of mainstream culture. This can also be thanked to its founder, Van Jones, whose book, *The Green Collar Economy* was the first book ever written by an African American on environmental issues to reach the New York Times best seller list (2008 Annual Report).

Green for All’s use of the persuasion of the WWW links very well with Jenkins and the trans media, as seen with the success of Van Jones book, as well, *Global Village* by Marshal McLuhan, and how Green For All links other cultures like the African American, Latino communities to rally around the importance of linking cleaning the air and reducing poverty.

Greenpeace, has shown some willingness to moderate their tone to gain new supporters, while both RePower America and Green For All, have seen that the WWW provides opportunities to provide a moderate view on green issues, making them more accessible to the mainstream public, as Henry Jenkins would say in the chapter, “Photoshop for Democracy” noting that “The current diversification of communication channels is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard: though some voices command greater prominence than others, no one voice speaks with unquestioned authority” (P.219).

Criticisms of the Environmental movement during the age of the WWW

Although the Environmental movement as seen above through the WWW has become more mainstream and less of a fringe subculture before the WWW days, criticism has While gains have been made in awareness, green products, alternative energy as environmental issues have come to the mainstream, there are aspects that may be self defeating. The environmental issues have become a part

of the commoditisation process within the capitalist system, which as cause most of the problems, noted by critics. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two Marxist theorists would point out that that “the diner must be satisfied with the menu”, (“The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, 1944), meaning that environmental issues must be satisfied within the capitalist system. This would also relate to the ideas of Dallas Smythe who argued that “There is no such thing as a free lunch” (Audience Labor: The Asymmetric Production of Culture), meaning that there is always a cost to everything. Some good examples would be Al Gore and trans-media for his books (Our Choice, An Inconvenient Truth), the documentary, the RePower America website and Current TV, creating a franchise.

Another example relating to the theories of Adorno, Horkheimer and Smythe, would be Ethical Funds. Their website, ethicalfunds.com, promotes socially responsible investing (SRI) and promotes the idea that “Ethical Funds sees money as a means to an end. Because money, if channelled properly, can actually fund remarkable change.” (Ethical Funds Website). All three of them would say, that this would not be benefitting the protection of the environment, but rather making us work hard to consume more so we can purchase Ethical Funds to help save the world. All three may bring a valid point with regards to concerns about consumption and its criticism within the environmental movement; however, as seen with the above examples with Greenpeace, RePower America and Green For All, the WWW, have made environmental issues and the movement mainstream, which can be a good thing to gather more support around this issue.

Conclusion

Before the WWW, the environmental movement had problems getting mainstream attention. In its early days, the conservation movement was a subculture for those who appreciated nature conservation issues in the late 1800s to mid 1900s. As television rose after WWII, so did environmental groups who were concerned with mass consumption and its relationship with the planet. At the same television framed environmental groups like Greenpeace as a fringe subculture which the mainstream

public being turned off.

The WWW came after the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization. This allowed environmental groups to shape more moderate messages. Greenpeace moderated their stance somewhat by providing a *Green Consumer Guide*, while moderate organizations like RePower America, and Green For All ties in economic, social and security issues along side environmental issues. While the WWW helped shaped environmental issues into mainstream society, some criticism is seen with the commoditisation of environmental issues. This includes SRI, using money to change the world, and Al Gore with his trans-media, franchise type dealings in television, books and the WWW.

Despite these criticisms, the WWW has played an instrumental positive impact in how environmentalist persuade the general public on green issues, which is vital considering concerns like climate change, will play to the general public.

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