



“Dealing with credit card debt and loans has the biggest impact on happiness.”

Ryan T. Howell, Ph.D.

Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

The Problem with Earth Day

24 hours of green living is not sustainable

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It's Earth Day again, which means it's time for a burst of editorials and advertising selling us on the benefits of green living. Plant a tree, recycle, think about your dirty ways, clean up, buy some Earth-friendly products, read green-themed magazines, grow your own, and swap the old light-bulbs for energy-saving ones. But then the Day ends, and it's back to business as usual.

Of course, Earth Day events can direct our attention to worthy environmental causes. For example, the United Farm Workers recruit citizens to lobby the Environmental Protection Agency to outlaw the spraying of the neurotoxin chlorpyrifos insecticide because of its impact on children.¹

But it also gives countless self-promoters the opportunity to push political ideology or commercial gain unrelated to the Day.² The most noxious examples include Californians for Population Stabilization's Earth Day propaganda to outlaw foreign citizens moving to join our proudly immigrant nation, and electronic-waste recyclers who sponsor Earth Day celebrations even as they engage in the illegal export of pollutants.³

Poor Earth Day. It was once dedicated to organizing mass action to radically change public policy, inspired by the movement that brought an end to the American War in VietNam. Today the hype is focused almost entirely on individual responsibility.⁴

So our question for Earth Day advocates is this: why should the consumer bear the brunt of environmental responsibility for Earth Day? Is it because it's just easier for companies and governments that way—and easier for us? We would hate for someone to ask us to put in a little extra green work if it was going to take up a lot of time. Most of us don't mind turning off the lights for an hour—light a candle, strum a guitar, play a board game, find some other low-wattage activity. It's only an hour. Thank goodness we can drink organic wine.

Some polling suggests that “Every Day is Earth Day” for many US consumers, but they are far from being a majority.⁵ Even if we opted for an Earth Month, it would be a month of Earth minutes, hours, days, and weeks of activities. We'd be morally elevated but knackered from the exertion of greening the planet. Aren't there more sustainable forms of creating a culture of sustainability?

There are, and the key is shifting the weight of responsibility to corporations, social institutions, and governments to make permanent what Earth Day relegates to a measly 24 hours a year.

If we got rid of the commemorative day altogether, what would take its place? How about a constitutional mandate to make sustainability a part of the social fabric? Greening The American Way of Life, so to speak. Sound crazy? If Ecuador can revise its constitution to give the Earth equal rights, why can't the most powerful country on the planet?⁶



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. **Toby Miller, Ph.D.**, is an interdisciplinary social scientist. [more...](#)

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There are less grandiose options. In previous posts, we have argued for the widespread implementation of green routines in workplaces, schools, and public spaces. There are plenty of other examples where ecologically savvy government investment in public works has created green infrastructures and hardwired sustainable energy consumption into urban landscapes.⁷

And there are positive signs that public demand is forcing the corporate world to adopt environmental principles. But here we are bit more skeptical. Businesses have yet to invest in greening the planet at a scale that matches their destruction of it. We're talking about the fox in the chicken coop, after all. And that is enough to alert us to the dodgy nature of actually existing green corporate initiatives. It's hard to imagine a hardline investor forgoing short-term gains, not to mention one who could tolerate negative revenue in exchange for a truly sustainable business. Is any capitalist willing to operate in the red in order to become green? That is the question we must answer in order to judge the trustworthiness of corporate participants.

Sustainability is not something that businesses can truck, bargain, and exchange. The Earth sets non-negotiable preconditions on how much it can give to and absorb from economic, social, and cultural activities. In its most radical interpretation, the idea of sustainability thoroughly discredits the growth model at the heart of capitalism itself. To believe otherwise requires some pretty powerful magical thinking.⁸

So when setting out alternatives to the Earth Day commemoration—from constitutional reform to public works and market regulation—it's clear that public policy matters above all else. To create a culture of sustainability, measures must be taken to ensure that the debt burden on treasuries and corporations is worth the ecological sustainability they are designed to create. What makes the effort worth the negative impact on growth? Living in a society devoted everyday to the wellbeing of the Earth and generations of its inhabitants. That returns us to the origins of Earth Day and its profound links to social-movement activism. It offers greater promise than endless attempts to invoke the good intentions of corporations or consumers.



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