Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.
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We Are All Biosphere People Now

The media need to wake up to that reality
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During his election-night speech last week, Barack Obama’s oratory suddenly turned green when he appealed for an America in which children are safe from “the destructive power of a warming planet.”¹

A week earlier, the governor of New York and the mayor of New York City drew on a similar rhetoric of inter-generational care when they linked climate change to Hurricane Sandy. Then BloombergBusinessweek’s November 1 cover story declared: “It’s Global Warming, Stupid.”²

Startled environmental activists said it was about time.³

But will we now start thinking like aware inhabitants of a biosphere and stop acting as if we were isolated from environmental processes that occur across the planet?

The truth is that we’ve been biosphere people virtually since the day industrial capitalism began to create a global system. It’s just taking a long time for some of us in wealthy countries, especially the US, to notice. There are three reasons for this.

The first is a paradox of globalization: as economic activities spread across the planet, their combined ecological effects become harder to witness and document. We can see pictures of our planet from outer space, but cannot easily connect the global dots of environmental damage caused by raw materials extraction, toxic supply chains, and pollution from energy, communication technologies, transport, and travel.

The second explanation is that US journalism, like its equivalents elsewhere, hasbungled the job of environmental reporting.⁴ As with most news cycles, the recent calamities that befell the northeast were presented as news hooks without adequate historical and scientific contextualization. Sandy was called a Frankenstorm, once-in-a-lifetime, a freak event.

Given the media’s failure to provide historical context for the storm, officials and residents interviewed by local media can be forgiven for sounding like befuddled characters in horror movies who mutter “ain’t seen nothin’ like this ‘round here before.” In fact, New York City experienced devastating hurricanes in 1815, 1821, 1893, and 1938. Then as now, lower Manhattan flooded, the barrier islands were hammered, and lives were lost. The difference today is that the region is more densely populated, “normal” sea levels are higher, and the Atlantic Ocean is warming.⁵

The third reason is related to how expert sources are routinely presented in the news in a he-said, she-said manner to suggest journalistic balance and objectivity. This procedure is not only ineffective in reporting climate change, it may be helping to delay action on it. There is scientific consensus that human emissions of greenhouse gases are a significant
factor causing global warming. Mainstream journalists can’t seem to accept that there aren’t two sides to this story or grasp that nature doesn’t care what we think. In this case, standard journalistic practice creates a situation in which climate change skeptics have undue media influence.\(^6\)

It’s no wonder people can conclude that the question of the climate crisis remains unresolved. This “crisis fatigue” is not helped by some environmentalists who make themselves vulnerable to accusations that they are killjoys, out to destroy hope and endanger employment. Sometimes they are so dire in their content and dour in their delivery that potential allies prefer the comfort of propaganda from think-tanks and PR firms shilling for extractive and manufacturing industries.\(^7\)

Inevitably, such messages from the media lead to doubt and confusion about the human relationship to environmental processes. Ten years ago before the economy tanked and climate skeptic propaganda surged, over three-quarters of all Americans and nearly two thirds of Republicans believed the atmosphere was warming. A Gallup poll from 2010 reported that while concern about the climate declined among Americans and Europeans more Latin Americans and sub-Saharan Africans saw themselves at risk. Today 67 percent of all Americans and 48 percent of Republicans think the Earth is warming, a slight increase over last year though other surveys say we are complacent about natural disasters.\(^8\)

Our beliefs are far from stable, though they appear to be headed towards realism across party affiliation.

To respond to these crises as a biosphere person is not simply a matter of acting locally and thinking globally. Even those who doubt the connection of climate change to Sandy acknowledge the need for a preparedness that goes beyond families and friends pitching in—it’s about the National Weather Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and a host of other domestic and international public entities.\(^9\)

Big government projects that protect and assist local ecosystems and residents exposed to flooding are neither new nor unusual. Without them, cities like Miami and New Orleans and countries such as the Netherlands and Bangladesh would be unthinkable.\(^10\)

Public works that invest in ecologically sound coastal protection with inter-generational ideas about climate change are a future for us all. As public opinion turns towards climate science, the green majority must support governmental initiatives with increased fervor. We’re in this together, and not just as neighbors.

Notes.


