

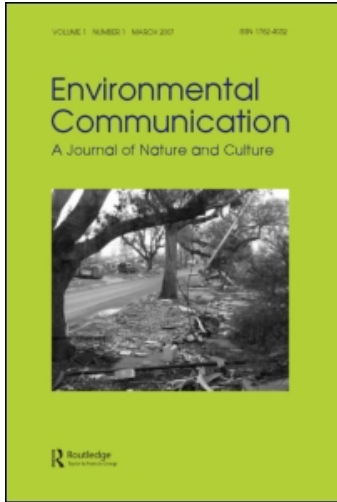
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## PRAXIS FORUM

# Defusing the Cannon/Canon: An Organic Media Approach to Environmental Communication

Antonio López

*In order to convey the dangers of climate change, many activists deploy the old canon of communication theory, which views mass media as a kind of “magic bullet.” Influenced by theories such as George Lakoff’s cognitive linguistics, they propose that environmentally “progressive” mass media frames can be aimed like a cannon at the “public mind.” This article argues that such an effort mirrors a mechanistic strategy of industrial production and remains a “shallow” method of environmental communications. In response, it is argued that “organic media,” like glasnost, is based on open and local contexts. This article concludes that “slow” and “small” communication environments can encourage biodiverse ecological intelligence, an approach that embodies a sustainable and “deep” methodology.*

*Keywords: Media Literacy; Deep Ecology; Environmental Communication; Cognitive Linguistics; Climate Change*

David Orr’s (1994, p. 12) suggestion that “all education is ecological education” challenges us to consider that teaching and learning is not just about the transfer of information, but worldviews. Likewise, after half a century of media theory, we should be well beyond a “content”-only approach to communication. If we are to bridge ecoliteracy with media literacy, it would be wise to consider the pedagogical

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dimension of media and to explore to what extent they have ecological worldviews embedded into them. Thus, when it comes to devising a response to planetary ecological catastrophe, it is my contention that we need to heed Wendell Berry's (2005, p. 36) "solving for pattern" approach, which means devising a healthy, organic media alternative to pre-existing mass communication strategies (using low-feedback, abstracted, audience directed media) that tend to speak in the same language as the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions. As a media literacy educator who has worked in diverse, multicultural environments, I have learned that we must find new communication models that don't rely on the same modes of thought that brought us to the current crisis, in particular models that respect and encourage biodiverse voices in a fluid and participatory manner. The "shallow" method of environmental communication, I suggest, is "mechanistic" and mass-market oriented, akin to Vandana Shiva and Third World Network' (1993) concept of "monocultural" thought. By contrast I propose a "deep" method that is designed for open and local contexts. As such, I believe "organic" media should evolve "slow" and "small" communication environments that encourage biodiverse ecological intelligence, an approach that embodies a sustainable methodology by offering a local alternative to the mechanistic strategy of mass media framing proposed by ecoAmerica and George Lakoff.

### **Global Warning: A Case Study**

To illustrate an example of mechanistic environmental communication, let me start with an anecdotal discussion about a well-meaning effort to solve the problem of environmental media, but was unsuccessful due to several double binds inherent to its strategy. In Fall 2008, I accompanied a group of undergraduate students to attend a conference, "Environment: From Global Warnings to Media Alert," held in San Servolo, Italy, a small island that shares the lagoon with its better known neighbor, Venice. Organized by the World Political Forum (founded by Mikhail Gorbachev), the event was intended to "challenge the international media to improve public understanding of the impact of climate change." We were traveling from Rome where I teach a Media and Environment course at an American university. The idea was to compare notes from our class with professionals who are strategizing large-scale solutions for environmental communication.

As an international gathering of media professionals on the frontlines of environmental communication, Global Warning attendees were comprised of print, radio, and TV journalists (new media specialists were absent), representatives of various European media trade organizations, global media activists, and a mix of government operatives, scientists, and communications experts. Heady stuff to be sure, yet one could feel a sense of powerlessness and frustration as the strategies bandied about seemed insufficient, especially against the background of the news unfolding during that week: the crashing world economy. I recall a final panicky moment when the World Political Forum's Andrei Grachev, someone who was at Gorbachev's side when the Soviet Union collapsed, bent over the podium with a loose tie and open collar like an anchorman proclaiming the end of the world. He announced the collapse of the

American, European, and Italian stock exchanges, and for a brief moment the entire discussion of environmental communication seemed moot.

Though many of the conference's criticisms of environmental reporting and suggestions for media reform were justified, little was novel. For example, an executive of Sky Italia (the regional division of News Corps' global satellite network) made the quintessential remark of the event: "We have to aim a cannon at the public mind." This is an unfortunate way of conceptualizing communications: clearly, he meant to bombard the public with facts, assuming that properly informed, the public will react and change their behavior appropriately. Moreover, his unintended double-entendre was actually quite appropriate because by implication what is also being aimed at the public is a canon of outdated communication theory. Nonetheless, if one were to listen closely, the conference's prevailing paradigm was actually contradicted by Gorbachev during his keynote address. In it he talked about the intention behind *glasnost*, which was to create an *openness* of communication through dialog about the conditions of society when he was head of state. To restate the obvious, "democracy equals participation," he said, and we need it on a planetary scale. By inference, the touted benefit of *glasnost* is its flexible process with a discussion-oriented framework that allows for variables and local contexts to interact. Whereas the "cannon/canon" is a top-down, mechanistic approach to media and communication, *glasnost* more closely represents a permeable and participatory communication model that I would characterize as organic.

The WPF conference—and hence the event as an anecdotal model for thinking about this PRAXIS forum—reflected a "shallow" and unspoken understanding of environmental communication: the belief that all communication is transmitted in a hermetically sealed environment between beings that clearly understand each other, occupying Cartesian space as Westernized rational subjects (DeLuca, 1999). In this problematic model, there is the transmitter in power and a passive audience with no power (such as the expert teacher who lectures submissive students). As DeLuca (1999, p. 119) argues, however, though hegemonic reality frames tend to promote preferred readings of news events. Rather than being "transmitted," mediated messages are experienced in a "heteroglossic public sphere." In other words, highly fragmented media texts are perceived by audiences in numerous contexts in which meanings vary greatly. The absence—silence, if you will—of a meaningful discussion about media environments coupled with the top-down information bombardment model correlates with the general problem of communicating ecological issues in a decidedly unsustainable system of communication. In my view, when we compare the Sky executive with Gorbachev, we end up with two contradictory frameworks of communication, the former being based on industrial modes of messaging ("aim the cannon"), the latter built around developing a more transparent exchange of ideas that allows for novel and open forms to emerge. Unfortunately, Global Warning's general approach is not much different than the language strategy advocated in the ecoAmerica (2009) report, "Climate and Energy Truths: Our Common Future." In either case, the communication model does not break out of an industrial paradigm of dissemination. In the end, the primary double bind here is that the mode of thinking (industrial/

scientific) that has created our current ecological crisis does not offer an alternative mode of engagement.

### Transmission, Conduits, and Frames

To put it in James W. Carey's (2009) terms, the Global Warning conference—and in my view most media responses to climate chaos—was dominated by a transmission view of communication, whereas a model based on *glasnost* could move us into a more cultural, and hence ritualistic, approach to developing solutions for impending environmental catastrophe, something I would deem “deep” and “organic.” For James W. Carey (2009, p. 12) “transmission” is linked to a 19th Century notion that binds communication with transportation, and ultimately an industrial model that situates communication as “the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control.” It is well worth considering a critique of “control over distance” when a host of ecological advocates (Michael Pollen, Vandana Shiva, Bill McKibben, Wolfgang Sachs, Wendell Berry, etc.) are arguing that local solutions are the antidote to the globalized crisis. And even though Carey's (2009, p. 26) argument predates the contemporary discussion of local versus global ecological solutions, his view is echoed in the current chorus for promoting community approaches to sustainability: “the problems of communication are linked to problems of community, to problems surrounding the kinds of communities we create and in which we live.” He (pp. 26–27) adds:

The widespread social interest in communication derives from a derangement in our models of communication and community. This derangement derives, in turn, from an obsessive commitment to a transmission view of communication and the derivative representation of communication in complementary models of power and anxiety. As a result, when we think about society, we are almost always coerced by our traditions into seeing it as a network of power, administration, decision, and control—as a political order. Alternatively, we have seen society essentially as relations of property, production, and trade—an economic order. But social life is more than power and trade (and it is more than therapy as well). As Williams has argued, it also includes the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments, and intellectual notions—a ritual order.

Carey's study of transmission correlates with Reddy's (1979) explication of the conduit metaphor. In it Reddy argues that our root metaphors for communication are based on the “conduit” in which information as things are passed from one person to another. But words can never “contain” meaning. For example, he critiques the Shannon–Weaver model of information theory (otherwise known as the “magic bullet” or “syringe” theory), which uncritically deploys the term “message” as its core metaphor. “Message” can have different meanings in different contexts (“I didn't read the message” vs. “I get the message, just keep quiet”). In each case “message” stands for different things and is ambiguous like “global,” “warming,” and “climate.” This becomes problematic when we choose a framing solution with core metaphors contrary to the goals of sustainability, such as the “progressive” frame promoted by George

Lakoff. It is a term associated with a history of unsustainable behavior (not because of left-oriented policies, but because of the connection it has with industrial and scientific “progress”). Chet Bowers (2008, p. 34) suggests that Reddy’s conduit metaphor thesis has vast implications for structuring an array of ideas and terms that cannot transcend any amount of framing if not confronted at the source:

This assumption [the conduit metaphor], or what I prefer to call a minor myth, has huge ecological and cultural consequences. It is necessary to the support of three other minor myths: namely that the individual is an autonomous thinker (at least has the potential to be), that there is such a thing as objective data and information, and that the rational process transcends all forms of cultural influence. The conduit view of language, which also is reinforced in print based modes of communication and storage (which includes computer mediated thinking and communication) leads to thinking of words as having a universal and timeless meaning that transcends cultures. It also contributes to ignoring that abstract words marginalize awareness of local contexts, tacit understandings, and embodied/culturally mediated experiences.

The conduit metaphor puts us in a double bind, as does “transmission,” because it locks us into Cartesian subjectivity, one that is at the core of our current economic system, which by all accounts, is driving the ecological crisis.

Additionally, the root metaphor of frame further implies a kind of control from a distance. A “frame” implies a window that opens up to a linear perspective from which we look out into the world as if it were a screen. Robert D. Romanyshyn’s (1989, p. 42) phenomenological study of linear perspective yields this important observation: “The condition of the window implies a boundary between the perceiver and the perceived . . . Enconced behind the window the self becomes an observing *subject*, a *spectator*, as against a world which becomes a *spectacle*, an *object* of vision.” I believe frames, if not properly contextualized, retain this sensibility of separation, mirroring again another facet of the Cartesian mind already critiqued in the root metaphors of “transmission” and “conduit.” This differs from Erving Goffman’s concept of frames, which suggests that multiple layers of meaning depend on an environment’s various behavioral cues.

So what happens when in our strategy we focus on the “transmission” of metaphorical frames? While I agree that repetitive images and concepts strengthen environmentally destructive thinking, Lakoff’s (2009, para. 6) claim that frames build circuits inside our minds, and his overall suggestion that we replace one framework with another (“progressive” instead of “conservative”), are reminiscent of mechanistic strategies for programming minds. The solution—mass media framing—still does not transcend the problematic construction of industrialized communication that abstracts and flattens the audience. Such would be the effect, I believe, of ecoAmerica’s advocacy for incorporating research-tested terms like “freedom,” “national security,” and “made in America,” which feel more like pandering to an abstract political discourse rather than cultivating awareness, responsibility, and action. As a borderland Latino US citizen living in Italy, how are focus group-tested phrases from Columbus, Ohio, supposed to engage me?

The notion of catastrophic global ecological collapse is often too abstract and large for the average person's immediate horizon line, but that doesn't mean it should be left to the "knowledge experts" to set the local agenda. Recalling E.F. Schumacher's (1973/1993, p. 131) dictum that "man is small . . . therefore small is beautiful," we could benefit from a scaling down of our thoughts to reorient ourselves to a landscape perspective (while also holding a space for the global dimensions of our current crisis) in order to strengthen the cultural commons and promote intergenerational dialogue within an inhabitable scale of perception. As Robert J. Brulle and J. Craig Jenkins (2006, p. 85) argue in their critique of Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus' "Death of Environmentalism" polemic (and by extension Lakoff), "professionals in cognitive linguistics become the arbiters of progressive values and the public simply an audience for the marketing of these ideas." Furthermore:

Movements are more effective if they engage citizens in a sustained dialogue rather than treating them as mass opinion to be manipulated . . . Is the cure to create new spin-doctors who promote different unified progressive frames? Or is it better to generate a genuine dialogue that creates value change and better understanding of both self and public interest? (p. 85)

Likewise, Schumacher (1973/1993, p. 130) argues, "The case for hope rests on the fact that ordinary people are often able to take a wider view, and a more 'humanistic' view, than is normally being taken by experts."

The "framers" are calling upon a set of global values that are simply impossible to define for everyone, the "progressive" versus "conservative" dichotomy being particularly harmful to traditional and land-based cultures that inhabit not only at least half the world, but a good portion of North America as well. In many cases "conservative" practices are beneficial to the land, whereas the "progressive" discourse reinforces the idea that destroying past knowledge is good for civilization. Without intending to do so, there is a subtle danger of promoting "monocultural" thinking that, if not careful, can be hijacked by megacorporations like Cargill, Monsanto, and British Petroleum who are already incorporating "sustainability" frames into their language. As Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash (1998, pp. 22–23) are right to point out, "global thinking" (and global frames designed to be just that) is an oxymoron because we can never know how another culture outside of our own thinks. Esteva and Prakash (1998, pp. 22–23) argue:

Excluded . . . from critical scrutiny are the reflections that in order for "global thinking" to be feasible, we should "think" from within every culture on Earth and come away from this excursion single-minded—clearly a logical and practical impossibility, once it is critically de-mythologized. For it requires the supra-cultural criteria of assuming that it is possible to "think" outside of the culture in which I every man and woman on Earth is immersed. The human condition does not allow such operations. We [the authors] celebrate the hopefulness of common men and women, saved from the hubris of "scientific man," unchastened by all his failures at playing God.

Esteva and Prakash critique the kind of sweeping, abstract thinking characteristic of Western technological thought and activism. The location of resistance, they argue, is

really in the person's daily actions when they engage (or disengage, as the case may be) multinational corporations or governments doing their bidding. The Zapatista movement, for example, is a local response to the global neoliberal project. Though its cause resonates with other international struggles, its goals and activities are geared toward strengthening the community's response to the radical ideology of global capital. This would contradict Lakoff (2009, para. 24), who believes,

the global economy and ecology are both systems. Global causes are systemic, not local. Global risk is systemic, not local. The localization of causation and risk is what has brought about our twin disasters. We have to think in global, system terms and we don't do so naturally. That is why a massive communications effort is needed.

The fact is, everyone lives somewhere and is in contact with the causes of the crisis. To deny the local dimension of biodiverse intelligence is to repudiate a multicultural response to the situation.

For me Esteva and Prakash's insight doesn't come cheaply. As a media educator I have worked extensively at different times in schools that serve Native American, Chicano, Mexican, and Afro-Caribbean communities, and discovered that contextualizing with local knowledge is absolutely necessary when engaging larger issues related to media and messaging. There was no formula that I could "plug and play" for instantaneous results. In every case there were lots of negotiation, which only works within an open and flexible communications environment. Currently I teach both Italians and Americans in the same classroom and find myself repeatedly having to negotiate theories and concepts so they make sense within different frameworks (or not, as is the case sometimes). Such a task is only possible when the intention is to make the classroom a community of practice in which participants *negotiate* the collective knowledge of our communication environment. Such an approach is an effort to model the cultural commons, which is lively, dynamic, interactive . . . and messy—it requires an assortment of interactions, communication styles, and cognitive perceptual modes—whereas the traditional university classroom (a mini version of the public sphere) is based on *print* literacy and the dissemination of information objects.

### **Small Media are Beautiful**

I believe if we are to achieve a kind of ecological *glasnost*, then we need to consider *small* and *slow* media. By "small" I don't mean Twitter. Although it is a kind of micro-communication, it is not slow, and its size is due to mechanized fragmentation (albeit networked) as opposed to human-scaled, live feedback conversation. Instead I have in mind the organic media equivalent of slow food, a way of preparing and eating meals that is sacramental and uses fresh, bioregionally produced ingredients. To bring it back to Carey's (2009, p. 15) terms, again we are talking about the difference between "transmission" and "ritual":

In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as "sharing," "participation," "association," "fellowship," and "the possession of a common faith." This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms



“commonness,” “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared belief . . . If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons I together in fellowship and commonality.

Linking Carey’s ritual concept of media with slow food is akin to Bill McKibben’s (2007, p. 131) idea for creating media that is like a “sonic farmer’s market.” Reminiscent of Berry’s “solving for pattern” approach discussed in the introduction, McKibben compares box store economics with mass media, and conversely, “like food radio used to be mostly local, hemmed in by mountains, limited by signal strength . . . for the most part radio served a *place* . . .” McKibben points to a study that shows in a farmer’s market you are 10 times more likely to have a conversation than in a supermarket. Likewise, a sonic farmers market, or community radio station, is more likely to generate discussion and dialogue about what matters in a community than satellite beamed content streaming disembodied talking heads who are ticking off bullet-point cognitive frames.

A community radio station, media literacy workshop, or a discussion group around an independently made documentary would exemplify “small and slow media” along the lines of Schumacher’s (1973/1993) idea of “intermediate technology.” To get a sense of this, just substitute the word “media” for “technology” in Schumacher’s (1973/1993, p. 127) following remark: “One can also call it self-help technology, or democratic or people’s technology—technology to which everybody can gain admittance and which is not reserved to those already rich and powerful.” This is why I value techniques that go against the notion of the “public mind” and mass-mediated public relations. Slow media can be poetry slams, or community film festivals that draw in local businesses and community members. One example is the Food for Thought Film Festival, which runs a film series in New York City’s underserved communities and invites organic farmers, caterers, and vendors to attend and exhibit at the festival. *The Story of Stuff*, a short animated documentary about sustainability that can be viewed on the Internet, has an assortment of lesson plans, research materials, and discussion topics that can be used in classrooms or for community meetings (Leonard, 2007). Robert Greenwald’s Brave New Films’ model of house party screenings and word of mouth distribution offers another approach. Then there is the Taos Solar Music Festival, a gathering for music and environmental education. In this particular form of slow media, dance and celebration are key aspects of revitalizing our ecological selves, which have been so dehumanized by all the large-scale technological projects of civilization. Bioneers, which is an annual gathering/conference of leading visionaries, deliberately stays small, knowing that becoming too big is counter to its mission. It has created various satellite hubs to accommodate its growing popularity, so as it keep the discussion on a bioregional scale.

Slow and small Internet activities are examples of an organic media paradigm that aims to promote a cultural commons, something that is constantly under attack and

dismantled in the process of capitalist enclosure. It is a cultural immune system response. Likewise, organic media should follow important architectural considerations, elements already present in the emergent practices of new media users, such as open source, peer-to-peer sharing, and creative commons, all of which are vital characteristics of living and open ecological systems. As such, the Internet has the potential to facilitate communities of practice, reassert a creative and cultural commons, and to be an organizational tool for people helping each other and to make connections. CouchSurfer.com, MeetUp.com, and craigslist.com (which spontaneously coordinated aid for New Orleans after Katrina) are just a few examples of how human connectivity is facilitated by Websites.

My particular focus, media literacy, is centered on dialogue about media messages, which gives people an opportunity to explore and to contextualize corporate media frames with local knowledge. I work to facilitate creating responses to these “media environments” through do-it-yourself media production. This is particularly effective when it is used to explore the implicit ecological themes permeating mass-mediated messaging. In this context, small media means making media for “internal” or local audiences. For example, in the past I taught in Native American communities. The products of our workshops were meant just for the communities, and were only shown during intergenerational gatherings that included potluck meals. They were intended to generate dialogue about issues of local concern.

## Conclusion

Some might say the problem is too big to go small. I disagree. The civil rights movement began with small acts of resistance, as did hundreds of other movements throughout time. We all have the capacity to empower ourselves, friends, and communities through changing our patterns right where we are. Our minds are not football fields, so we should stop strategizing over how to hierarchically mass organize public opinion like opposing sports teams, a dangerous and undemocratic approach that can be traced back to Walter Lippmann’s concept of “manufactured consent” (see Herman, 2000). To be clear, I don’t consider the research of ecoAmerica or Lakoff’s ideas unuseful; human language is inescapably metaphorical. At the beginning of this essay, I stated that media are pedagogical. Mass communications do influence our worldview and impact our efforts to create change. Yet, without transcending the paradigm of mechanistic thought, I don’t believe framing strategies alone will produce the deep change necessary.

Finally, several questions still need to be addressed in thinking about environmental communication strategies:

- How can news professionals communicating scientific information compete with the mythical discourse of consumer-oriented advertising?
- Is there a space for sustainable “thinking” in the commercial structure of mass media?

- In such an environment, can ecological “frames” and “messages” transcend their context, namely that of the globalized technocratic media whose most powerful message is “progress” and “development” through consumption and waste?
- Can language-based frames counteract image-based frames?
- Finally, how conscious are our strategies of the double bind that we are trying to solve a communications problem with the very thinking that created it?

I’m well aware that what I propose represents a messy and ambiguous path. That is my intention. If we are to heed an ecological solving for pattern approach, then what we are doing is creating “disturbances” in a closed system of communication that is badly in need of negative feedback. In the very least, we can behave like the biological creatures we are by revitalizing an organic form of communication that harmonizes with our core ecological intelligence.

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