

Alison G. Anderson

Media, Environment and the Network Society, London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2014, pp. 203

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Any published book hopefully has different layers, which may suit different readers. A novel could be considered brilliant for the writing skills of the author, for the plot, and for the underlying message within the entire book. This is similar to what I felt once I finished *Media, Environment and the Network Society* by Alison Anderson from Plymouth University.

Anderson is a relevant contributor to the broader debate about environmental communication at the crossroads with studies of public opinion. Since the early 90s, she worked intensely on media coverage of environmental issues (Anderson 1991), focusing on both risk and natural hazard communication (Anderson et al. 2009; Anderson 2000). She often concentrated on environmental catastrophes, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill (Anderson 2002) and the Prestige oil spill (Anderson and Marhadour 2007). Thus, it is not by chance that the cover of “Media, Environment and the Network Society” is a picture of the Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill, which occurred in 2010. Some key events in the global environmental governance, such as the UNEP Rio World Summit in 1992, have been relevant case studies during her career (Anderson and Garber 1993).

In a certain way, *Media, Environment and the Network Society* is an overview of Anderson’s research interests and experiences in the field of environmental communication. The author redefines her early research questions, becoming conscious of the mutated scenario for communication. In the Introduction (p. 3), she declares: “Since I wrote *Media, Culture and the Environment* (published in 1997), the media landscape has considerably changed (...)”. Therefore, a key motivation for Anderson was to update the studies on environmental communication to the most recent development of media technologies. She went further. Indeed, within this general purpose she integrated an empirically informed review of such theoretical approaches as risk society and network society. She used them to thoroughly survey the entire debate of environmental communication. This is a key point that makes the book worth consideration by a broad audience.

After the Introduction, the following chapter presents the theoretical background that will be recognizable within the entire book. Anderson examines a “new spectacularization” of environmental issues by describing the communication strategies of Greenpeace for the campaign “Save the arctic”. This allows her to introduce the role of celebrities in environmental communication and to assess their contribution to the visibility

of a specific issue (e.g. climate change). The fairly large number of examples proposed allows the author to introduce two theoretical references that will motivate the subsequent chapters: risk society by Ulrich Beck and network society by Manuel Castells. What Anderson proposes is a critical review of these theoretical contributions. Risk is a key issue in communication and Anderson signals it as a specific topic for scholars in that field. Network society is a clear theoretical view that needs to be tested through research. Regarding the former, as noted before by others (see Cottle 1998), Anderson observes that the media context has been often under-developed despite being a relevant brick of Beck's theorization about risk. For the latter, Anderson assumes Castells' theoretical proposal in his *Communication Power* (2009) as a good way to synthesize the media landscape configuration and its general functioning. Within this context, the configuration of power changes significantly depending on the level of access to the means of communication, the ability to define interaction rules, the opportunity to set-up its contents, and to further define the general aims. Accordingly, even environmental communication's peaks and agenda should convey of these processes. Within this frame, Castells, as Anderson pointed out, assumes that specific actors (tycoons, celebrities), who endorse environmental issues, are extremely influential in promoting salience and more likely to shift public opinion on said issues. Similarly, should big companies involved in hot crises, such as the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, decide to set up a specific representation (or not-representation in a spiral of silence) of a crisis it will overwhelm other actors leaving them little room. By recalling several researches dedicated to climate change and oil spill crises, Anderson offers a specific critique to this mutated "media landscape" and in general to Castells' assumptions, demonstrating how these processes can actually be configured differently. Indeed, as Anderson impressively demonstrates, celebrity endorsement of climate change does not necessarily shift public opinion significantly. On the other hand, actors who own more networked power, or the capacity to set up the agenda (Castells 2009, 44), are not by definition untouchable by those who have not. This is brilliantly shown in Chapter 5. During the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the sky above Deepwater Horizon oil platform was interdicted to flight below a certain height; basically, the spill extension could not be mapped by other sources except BP. In response to that, a group of activists in Louisiana launched a campaign to map the spread of the oil, aiming at sharing it on the web via real time images. They were successful in bypassing BP censorship strategies distributing a kit for launching helium inflated balloons equipped with digital cameras; indeed, they created an alternative infrastructure for information sharing about the oil spill crisis.

Before the conclusion, where Anderson sums up the main outcomes of her work, she includes a chapter about nanotechnology and synthetic biology as a new field to be investigated for environmental communication as well as risk representations. This deserved more space but the

book has been designed to be a dense but easily read one. In fairness, this chapter reviews previous studies on these emerging technologies (as the title of the chapter) and it is balanced compared to the others.

As I declared at the beginning of this review, I found different stimulating layers in this book. They might be all of interest for a variety potential readers.

A first layer, and the one that is the easiest to grasp, can be called the “review layer”. It is for those that are unaware of the debate about environmental communication; this book offers a large amount of up-to-date references on the topic especially for those interested in climate change media coverage and on environmental “hot crisis” narration.

A second layer offers some methodological food for thought. Especially in chapter three there is a critique about robustness and representativeness of news media researches carried out through newspapers; it is rare to find criticisms on the choices of analyzing news-stories coverage through a specific newspaper or a selection of media sources.

A third layer is theoretical. I have already discussed above the criticism to Castells’ postulations about networked society and the role of specific gatekeepers for information; however, it is worth noting how the thesis of Castells have been carefully explored as research hypothesis by Anderson both in a second level analysis and through original research.

A final layer I came across is less evident. Possibly, it represents the most interesting element for STS-oriented readers. It is Anderson’s emphasis on the role of media technologies in the infrastructure of circulating information. Among the many examples she gives, the one of crowd-data to map 2010 of oil spill is maybe the most significant. Indeed, environmental activists aligned heterogeneous elements, such as DIY knowledge (for the small inflating balloons engineering), digital photography (the cameras), and the Internet (crowd-founding and free sharing of images) in order to gather and share first-hand data. This example, is not only relevant to critically deepen Castells’ theories, rather, it is something that goes in the direction wished for by Brunton and Coleman (2014). That is to say, it goes closer to media infrastructure to understand media communication itself. Indeed, exploring such kinds of linkages between information production/sharing in the context of environmental communication could be an interesting way to expand connections between STS and media studies as well. This is currently a developing field, pioneering several contributions for both communities (Gillespie et al. 2014; Parks and Starosielski 2015).

This last layer may be hidden for Anderson too or, at least, it was unlikely at the core of her wishes. Perhaps it is something I recognised exactly because I was eager to find it. Anyway, as I hinted before, the richness of a book lies precisely in the *stimuli* that it can give to different readers. In my opinion “Media, Environment and the Network Society” positively succeeds in that.

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