Communication and media studies: curricula responding to a changing world

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Abstract
Communication and media studies curricula have always prepared students to be responsive to the changing world around them through critical, systemic and creative thinking. This article considers some of the global challenges that students are likely to face as they lead their lives in the twenty-first century (peak oil, climate instability, food insecurity, etc.) and questions whether curricula will need to become more grounded in the ecological embedding of human minds, individuals and societies within the larger systems that support life.

Introduction
In a world facing an uncertain future it is useful to reflect on some of the things that we can be fairly certain about: that over the next twenty years the climate will become less stable, the production of oil will begin its inevitable downward fall, that population growth and growth in consumption will put additional pressure on the resources of the planet, and that water, food and energy will become increasingly scarce and fought over. Each time a major report such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the Stern Review, the IPCC AR4, the UNEP GEO4, or the Hirsch Report (Hirsch et al, 2005) is published, the certainty grows.

The great uncertainty, however, is the human response to the changing conditions around us: whether the generation of students who are currently in higher education can find ways to adapt and thrive in a deteriorating world, and (as far as possible) slow down the deterioration while doing so. Widespread social change is inevitable, not just because we have reached the physical limits of resource depletion, but also because of self-imposed constraints such as the 80% reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 as required by UK law. This is an exciting time for communication and media studies because social and cultural change has always been a central concern, and is now guaranteed. All that remains is determining what direction that change will take, a task that the current generation of students will be playing a central role in. Students may have a vision of a society where people can find genuine meaning and satisfaction in ways which do not rely on over-consumption and over-use of fossil fuels. They may have other visions of a better future, but what is certain is that the twentieth century vision of endless cheap oil and unlimited increases in consumption can no longer be entertained.

The question for all disciplines is whether Higher Education is fully preparing students for the conditions of the world that they will be leading their lives, communities and businesses in. This is a particularly important consideration for communication and media studies since the media both inform people about the state of the natural systems they depend on for life, as well as being heavily reliant on the advertising revenue of energy intensive industries which are undermining those systems.

Tilbury and Wortman (2004) describe five key areas of education which can help students become actively engaged in working towards a more

sustainable society: imagining a better future, critical thinking and reflection, participation in decision making, partnerships, and systemic thinking. This article considers two of these areas, critical thinking and systemic thinking, in the context of communication and media curricula.

Critical and reflective thinking

Perhaps more than in any other discipline, communication, media and cultural studies curricula supply students with the foundations they need to deeply question the society and culture they live in and influence the direction of change. This is evident from the *Communication, media, film and cultural studies benchmark statements* (QAA, 2002) which are (at least to some degree) a reflection of the extant curricula they were derived from as well as the curricula they subsequently influenced.

The benchmark statements encourage critical awareness of 'the pivotal role which communications, media and culture play in the social, economic and political organisation of contemporary societies' (p.1), not just in a static way, but in an actively engaged way where students gain an understanding of 'the role which community and participatory media forms...play in...contesting social power' (p.7). As the life support systems of the Earth deteriorate it is clear that political, financial, educational and media institutions are reacting with inertia. This may be because the prevailing discourses which structure them are based on the short term interests of the powerful rather than the continuing ability of the Earth to support everyone (powerful and powerless alike). Through understanding the operation of discursive power and its contestation students can help work towards overcoming this inertia and contributing to preferred social changes before ecological collapse leads to change in uncontrolled directions that may be undesirable for all.

In addition to political, economic and social levels of organisation, the benchmarks refer to the personal, encouraging consideration of 'the ways in which understandings of self and the world are formed in relation to... texts (questions of 'identity')' (p.1). Students therefore have the opportunity to engage in 'reflective education' (p.1) and develop the ability to constantly question whether the social practices that make them who they are are aligned with the direction of social change that they want to see. This could be of value in their role as future professionals, since it could be argued that it means something fundamentally different (i.e., at the level of identity) to be a journalist/pilot/lecturer/builder in a society which is on a path towards collapse. Reflective education can therefore help develop the kind of critical and flexible professional identities that can be responsive to the changing conditions of the world.

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Finally, the benchmarks mention 'creative...capacities' (p.1) and the 'symbolic resources through which people...develop projects for the future' (p.2). This is essential because simply recognising that the path of cheap oil and ever increasing consumption is coming to an end is not enough - students will need skills in creativity and futures thinking to open up new paths and possibilities for the future.

Systemic thinking

There is one potential problem, however, if critical thinking is limited to the levels of the psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, discursive, textual and the symbolic. The problem is that the 'rest' could potentially be ignored: the ecological, environmental, biological, physical, the material, the sensual, in other words the ground from which life (and all symbolic activity) arises and is sustained. If these aspects are ignored then effort could be spent in working towards futures which may be immensely desirable, but unsustainable, and so bound to run into absolute physical and biological limits and ultimately collapse.

The implication of this for systems thinking in communication and media curricula is that it is becoming increasingly important to go beyond the interaction of human systems with each other (e.g., media, society and economy), to a broader focus on the complex dialectical relationship between human systems and the larger systems which support life on Earth. In this two-way relationship, human systems represent and draw inspiration from natural systems in non-deterministic ways, while simultaneously having a direct physical impact on those systems through encouraging particular forms of human behaviour.

As an example of how systems thinking could be expanded to include larger systems, consider the benchmark statement which calls for 'an understanding of how disability, class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexuality and other social divisions play key roles in...modes of representation in media texts' (QAA, 2002, p.6). It would, however, also be possible to include the modes of representation of other species, forests, lakes, even climates - going beyond 'social divisions' to the 'ecological divisions' which tend to divide humans from the larger natural systems which make their existence possible. Consideration of 'ecological divisions' could be from a deep ecology perspective which recognises the intrinsic worth of other species or the flourishing of life in general. Or it could be from a survivalist perspective, which recognises that how we represent and treat other species, forests, lakes, etc, will ultimately determine whether the Earth will continue to be hospitable for human life. Either way, social issues, racism, social justice and social power have ecological dimensions, as people are deprived of the community, physical and environmental resources they need to thrive.

There has recently been a surge in new subdisciplines (or perhaps we could call them super-disciplines) which attempt to consider human systems in the context of the larger ecological systems that humans exist within, such as ecopsychology, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, ecolingusitics and eco-critical discourse analysis (see Stibbe, 2008, also www.ecoling.net). Discourse analysis within a broader ecological framework is particularly relevant to media and cultural studies curricula, and the following sections discuss three significant discourses.»

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Advertising Discourses

Advertising is a useful place for students to start to develop systemic thinking since the psychological, social and ecological aspects of the construction of consumer identities are readily apparent. Certain consumer identities have the potential not only to encourage the form of debt-driven consumerism that causes economic instability and ecological damage, but also to pull people away from the things which could genuinely satisfy their higher needs. This is particularly clear in the case of the large number of advertisements that use images of things which people really want or need (love, happy moments with friends and family, time in nature, outdoor exercise, meaningful experiences, etc.) in order to sell them environmentally damaging false substitutes such as junk food, sugary drinks, designer trainers, plasma TVs etc. In one particular advertisement, for example, a mother is shown sitting on an enormous sofa reading a book happily to her daughter, with the implicit logic of advertising discourse implying that you too can obtain this family bliss through purchase of the sofa. Other advertisements advertise credit cards and loans in ways which make them appear to be the answer to gaining a more satisfying and spiritual life. If students apply systemic thinking to the discourse analysis of advertising, then it is possible for them to understand connections between the media, the construction of consumerist identities, the larger economic systems that consumerism arises from, and, importantly, the social and ecological impact of consuming unnecessarily large amounts of 'stuff'.

Becoming critically aware of the content of advertising and its potential impact on human and natural systems is, of course, just a first step. Equally important in a media studies context is the indirect impact of advertising on the actual content of the media, and the extent to which the *raison d'étre* of certain media is to create a buying mood amongst readers in order to sell advertising space. As the benchmark statements (QAA, 2002) point out, students need to gain an awareness of 'the economic forces which frame the media, cultural and creative industries' (p.4). Awareness could turn into action as students resist the discourses which promote consumerism and ecological damage by preferring the kind of activities that advertisements so often depict (time in nature, with friends and family, doing exercise, etc) rather than purchasing the unnecessary products they offer as alternatives. This could help students from any discipline develop personal resilience in the face of peak oil, climate change and declining ecosystem productivity. For journalism students in particular, though, the issue of advertising and the unsustainable practices it promotes raises important questions about ethics in their future careers, and the extent to which they will have the freedom to resist the influence of economic forces they see as endangering the future of their species.

Economic Discourses

Advertising is, of course, embedded within larger economic discourses, and awareness of these is essential for media students since dominant economic models are so frequently drawn on by the media. The most obvious example is the prevalent model which sees economic growth (whatever the source) as good and more growth as even better. While one section of a newspaper might describe how over-consumption is undermining the life support systems of the planet, another may be drawing from this 'growth is the only good' discourse and lamenting a reduction in high street sales or an airline going bankrupt.

If students can expose the models behind hegemonic discourses then they can realise that they are just particular models of the world which have advantages and disadvantages and can think of alternatives which better reflect the changing conditions of the world.

Through discourse analysis, students can start to gain an awareness of the way that particular models of the world are unthinkingly and automatically rolled out to describe particular events. To give a typical example, the *Guardian* (24/7/2008) published an article 'High street sales plunge 3.9%'. From an ecological perspective, a fall in sales means fewer ecologically damaging products consumed, a postponement of peak oil, and a chance for society to think about redistributing work and resources so that everyone can fulfil basic needs and search for cultural ways to fulfil higher needs. Automatically, however, any reduction in consumption is represented negatively. In this case, the article uses expressions such as 'sales on the high street *suffered their worst ever fall*', 'retail sales in June *slumped*', 'the poorest rate for over two years', 'footwear shops were the *worst hit*...', 'household goods saw a *gloomy* month...reflecting the *dire* state of the UK housing market' (emphasis added). The same negative discourse is used when sales of luxury cars are reduced 'Sales of new cars in the UK *slumped* by almost a fifth last month to produce the *worst* August for the industry....Jaguar down 41%, Land Rover almost 58%' (Guardian 4/9/2008). There is no 'balanced' view here, where other voices describe the positive benefits of a reduction in consumption and the need for redistribution of resources. This, then, is an example of a hegemonic discourse, i.e., one which perpetuates a 'misperception of its arbitrariness...so that it comes to be seen as transparently reflecting economic realities rather than constructing them in certain ways' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, p.5).

If students can expose the models behind hegemonic discourses then they can realise that they are just particular models of the world which have advantages and disadvantages and can think of alternatives which better reflect the changing conditions of the world. This is something which is of immense importance in the twenty-first century, since the disadvantages of certain dominant models of society are becoming very readily apparent.

Environmental discourses

It is largely through environmental discourses in the media that people become aware of some of the parameters of the world they live in, parameters which can provide a reality check for evaluating economic and consumerist discourses such as 'more is always better'. There are therefore important topics for the curriculum related to how science and the environment are reported, topics which could help students become more critically aware consumers and producers of environmental news. The deepest question is the extent to which advertisers and the short-term business interests of billionaire media owners influence the reporting of environmental issues. This translates into questions about whose voices

appear in the news, and why industry sponsored scientists or think tanks are often called on to 'balance out' the opinions of a consensus of scientists (Harrabin and Black, 2007). As an example, the BBC published an article by Martin Keeley (2004a), who they described as 'Geologist, and a visiting professor at University College London' entitled 'Climate change is the norm', which denied that humans were involved in driving climate change. Surprisingly though, Keeley's (2004b) own website refers to him as 'Martin Keeley, wealth creator and entrepreneur', with the admission that 'my main entrepreneurial focus has shifted back to oil and gas...The run-away oil price has finally woken up investors to the value creation potential of exploration.' Students could question whether a petroleum geologist whose main business interest is selling oil and gas is the right person to inform the public about the science of climatic variation, and whether his opinion is necessary to 'balance' the consensus of hundreds of scientists who actually do research on the climate.

Other questions relate to why certain issues which have profound implications for the future of society (such as peak oil) are rarely mentioned in the news, and how science is reported. In particular, single scientific studies tend to be represented as definitive despite the tentative language used in reports themselves, leading, potentially, to great confusion as the 'definitive' message changes week by week. And finally, there is the issue of the general way that environmental discourses in the media represent the living world - whether they represent humans as a part of natural systems or separate from them, whether they represent the myriad of species and ecosystems which support life as being of value, or, indeed, represent them at all.

Conclusion

This article has considered the role of education in helping students prepare for the changing conditions of the twenty-first century, particularly the personal and social changes that will inevitably occur in both adapting to a deteriorating world and trying (as far as possible) to slow the deterioration down. Many of the critical thinking skills necessary to expose the models that underlie an unsustainable industrial society and chart new directions for self and community are already built into media studies curricula. However, the biological breakdown and exhaustion of physical resources that is occurring in the twenty-first century may require a form of systems thinking which goes beyond a focus on the interaction of human systems, to a broader systems approach which includes the interaction of media, culture, politics and other human systems with the larger ecological/physical/biological systems that support life.•

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