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Media, Sustainability and Everyday Life

Geoffrey Craig

Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication

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Preface and Acknowledgements

How should we respond to climate change in our everyday lives? What changes should we implement in our everyday practices in our houses, in our work, energy use, transport, and food consumption? And if we implement changes how effective will they be in making our society and the planet more sustainable? For many of us who are deeply concerned about global warming—and it should be all of us—climate change seems such an overwhelming problem and our own individual attempts to live more sustainably seem to be woefully ineffectual in the face of such a huge dilemma that requires structural changes to the way we run our economy and manage our society. This book starts from the position that the necessary large-scale reorganisation of society also necessarily involves changes to individual lifestyles. Our individual lifestyles must change as both a response to, and a driver of, large-scale societal reorganisation and cumulatively such individual responses can have substantive effects across the society. We start from the position that every individual decision—where do you buy your food from, how do you get to work, what clothes do you buy, etc.—has environmental consequences that cannot be dismissed, whether you are a politician, a stay-at-home parent, an activist, a mechanic, a hairdresser or an academic. We start from the position that a central feature of social organisation that is responsive to climate change is the formation of resilient local communities where 'individual' lifestyles are grounded in ethical, socially and environmentally productive relationships.

Our more focused concern is with *communication* about sustainable lifestyles. The discussion and analysis that follows in this book examines how different types of media represent sustainable lifestyles. The discussion is informed by the critical frameworks of media and communication studies, and cultural studies more broadly, although work from a variety of academic disciplines is also employed in order to elucidate the complex relationship between media, sustainability, and everyday life. Within the broad areas of study in environmental communication that have been identified by Cox (2013), this study is located primarily within the category of representations of the environment and sustainability in popular media, although journalistic representations more specifically are also explored in the book. It is important that representations of sustainable everyday life are examined because such analyses reveal the sense-making processes that are at play in media texts and how the meanings of sustainable everyday life are generated. As has been previously stated, "representation is the social process of representing [and] representations are the products of the social process of representing" (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 265). The kinds of textual analysis that are conducted here, then, seek to demonstrate the relationship between the concrete texts that are scrutinised and the ideological values that inform the texts. The meanings that stem from the *textuality* of the stories, programmes, and online sites are fundamentally *social* as they present the world in a particular way and work to naturalise that presentation. The analyses interrogate the meanings of the texts of sustainable everyday life and comment on the significance of the representations but the analyses do not extend to a discussion and evaluation of the specific *effects* of such representations. While media representations of sustainable everyday life are often ultimately informed by recognition of the need for all of us to change our behaviour, the analyses here do not seek to measure the effects of such representations or to empirically demonstrate the efficacy of one form of representation over another.

The book is premised upon recognition of the power of media to 're-present' or 'mediate' both our everyday lives and public life more broadly. As I have previously written (Craig 2004), the media are not outside observers of the phenomenon they represent and mediation does not offer a transparent view of the world. The concept of mediation provides media with a central, integral role in knowledge production that prompts a critical perspective on media production but this perspective should not be informed by a belief that the process of mediation always

provides a 'distortion' or 'inaccurate' representation of real-world events, stories and relationships. Rather, the concept of mediation foregrounds the way that our engagement with the world necessarily occurs through discourse and the sense-making mechanisms of the media. The discussion in Chapter 1 will demonstrate the extent to which both sustainability and everyday life are products of mediation, even though both concepts are commonly understood with reference to their material realities: the natural environment and particular grounded spaces, times and practices.

The media are not presented here as a monolithic force that imposes a singular vision of everyday sustainability. While, for example, it will be discussed how the political economy of media, and the commercial contexts of advertising, commonly influence the framing of lifestyles in portrayals of everyday sustainability, it will be demonstrated that the portrayals and meanings of sustainable everyday life are not solely captured through the invocation of such a theoretical perspective. The media that are analysed here span conventional forms of mass media—print, advertising, television—and also forms of social media, but the analysis is not driven by an evaluative framework that privileges one form of media over another, even though the case studies in Chapters 6 and 7 do demonstrate the ability of social media to facilitate environmental activism and localcommunity group formation. Rather, the focus is on highlighting the generalised ability and power of media to visualise and represent sustainable everyday life, providing a subject that conventionally occurs below the public threshold with a public presence and significance. This is in itself important because, as discussed particularly in Chapter 3, everyday sustainability does not fit easily within existing media genres and formats: everyday environmental action is commonly overshadowed by news reportage of the global political, scientific and technological contexts and developments of climate change while equally the political character of sustainable everyday life—to the extent that it questions the values and practices of the consumer society—sits awkwardly within conventional presentations of lifestyle media. In this way, the book explores the simple question: what does sustainable everyday life look like through forms of media representation?

This simple question, of course, belies the complexity and variability of such representations. As we will see, the presentation of sustainable everyday life occurs across a broad media landscape although it is also the case that such a subject is primarily contained within particular

genres and formats given it is largely concerned with the individual, the domestic and the private sphere. Reading across the case studies of media representation in this book we can see how sustainable everyday life provides challenges for existing media frameworks and value systems, attributing social and political significance to a private sphere where people are conventionally cast as atomistic consumers, and also highlighting how the activities of individuals within the private sphere are inextricably connected to broader contexts: spatially, to communities, nations and the global, and materially, through processes of production, distribution and consumption. The case studies also reveal how significantly the different types of media and media genres influence the portrayal of sustainable everyday life, ranging from 30-second advertisements replete with catchy jingles, to front-page stories in national newspapers, to forms of reality television, and to social media use by local groups. Cumulatively, this highlights not only the variability in the production of the appearance and meanings of sustainable everyday life but also the different potentials for the uptake and use of those representations in the broader public debates about how to move to a more sustainable future. These different types of representations are crucial to public understandings of environmentalism, particularly given the complexity of global warming and the noted anxiety about how to respond to it in our everyday life. As we will see, the media texts of sustainable living variously negotiate issues of sustainability: they are implicated in production and industry demands and often locate everyday sustainability in the contexts of the existing consumer society although it is also the case that the stories and images of sustainable living in newspaper stories, television programmes, online sites, and advertisements sometimes provide projections of the possibilities of a more environmentally friendly existence.

Important features of the analyses of sustainable everyday life in this book are the revelations of how people act as sustainable subjects and how they interact with the natural environment and other people as they engage in sustainability. The book explores the way that environmental lifestyle media are characterised by projections of self-improvement as people seek to live in a more sustainable manner. The texts that are analysed here are primarily entertainment media but they also crucially are texts that inform and educate and are involved in the governance of subjects. Such governance can occur through different forms of representation and modes of address, variously disciplining people through evoking fears and worries about deficient knowledge about sustainability,

establishing markers of cultural sophistication, and also encouraging individuals through the presentation of alternative regimes of pleasure and self-fulfilment that can be generated through practices of sustainable everyday life. The book also draws on sustainability's often-noted feature of interconnectedness and the analyses in later chapters show how the media texts are often concerned with representing and interrogating networks of everyday sustainability in a way that problematises the solitary, bounded nature of domestic quotidian existence. The networks that these texts trace are both the material networks of production, distribution and consumption and also the accompanying semiotic networks that motivate and animate the material networks.

The focus on the media representations of everyday green lifestyles underlines the discursive basis of sustainability, a feature of the concept that is sometimes insufficiently considered given its obvious material realisation. Sustainability is a complex subject that is invoked and investigated across a range of academic disciplines, across the so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, and it materialises in different regimes of knowledge. Understandings of sustainability, of course, are also used in public policy, corporate and more general public forums. As we will see in Chapter 1, sustainability is mobilised for the promotion of very different political projects, reinvigorating economic growth and profoundly challenging the 'unsustainability' of global capitalism. It is not possible though here in this book to outline the different disciplinary, political and public uses and understandings of sustainability. Instead, the focus, as noted, is on the meanings of sustainability as presented across a range of different media. It is argued here in this book that there is not a singular content or set of practices that constitute sustainability and that much of its strength as a concept resides in ongoing public contestation about sustainability and the various attempts to implement, or move towards, sustainability. It is acknowledged that the polysemic potential of sustainability has been fully exploited by different social interests but it is maintained here that sustainability remains a crucial term because of the way it can be used to prioritise environmental welfare while also insisting on understanding the way that economic and social life are dependent upon the maintenance and nurturing of the environment. As noted, the book highlights the networked basis of sustainability and importantly the way that sustainability as a concept foregrounds the relationships between the environment and human activity, and also the relationships between spheres of production, distribution and consumption that are ordinarily

obscured in the flux and flow of modern consumer life. It is revealed across the case studies how a primary function of the media narratives is to explore and thematise the networks of sustainable everyday life.

The realm of everyday life is the third primary concept that informs the concerns of this book and again it is posited that the concept is substantively understood as a mediated and networked phenomenon. The discussion here seeks to initially delineate and argue for the importance of everyday life as the site where identity formation, knowledge production, elemental practices and a sense of well-being are generated. It is demonstrated that while there is a specificity to everyday life, located primarily within the private sphere, it also has a profoundly porous connection to public life, both materially through engagements with objects and services, and discursively through the ways that the world enters our everyday lives through media and through the ways we use media to communicate with the world. It will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 the ways that media have mined everyday life through forms of lifestyle media, and the analyses more broadly demonstrate how the genres and formats of lifestyle media can discipline and contain everyday life while also at times offering narratives that point to emerging ways of living. The book specifically examines how media represent everyday life through the thematic concerns of sustainability and it is here that the environmental consequences and potential of everyday life are elucidated. Everyday life is presented as an important site of sustainability where the environmental consequences of modern existence can be demonstrated and where alternative regimes of knowledge and pleasure can be propagated.

The book establishes the theoretical framework of the project in the opening two chapters. The first chapter outlines the understandings of key terms, such as sustainability, and its networked constitution, and everyday life, and it also provides an overview of the concept of lifestyles, considering them in the contexts of research into ethical consumption and also the ways they can be mobilised as strategies of distinction. The second chapter then investigates environmental lifestyle media, locating lifestyle media in the broader media landscape and delineating the relationship that *environmental* lifestyle media have with regard to lifestyle media formats more broadly. The commercial basis of much of lifestyle media is acknowledged with a discussion on the relationship between lifestyle media and advertising. The chapter then provides an extended consideration of how environmental lifestyle media can be evaluated,

outlining their functions as texts that both inform and entertain, and how they can both facilitate democratic impulses through their modes of address and their concerns with the common concerns of everyday life, while also functioning sometimes as instruments of cultural distinction. The chapter elaborates on this identity of environmental lifestyle media through a discussion of the broader processes of governance and subject formation that occur in the kinds of texts that are explored throughout the rest of the book.

The second section of the book offers analyses of how sustainable everyday life is represented across a range of media. Chapter 3 focuses on Green Living in Newspapers, providing discussion about the functions of weekend colour supplements where stories and columns about sustainable living are often located. The chapter initially though provides details of a study of environmental lifestyle reportage across UK newspapers before a second analysis focuses more specifically on green lifestyle columns and stories in the weekend supplements of UK newspapers. Chapter 4 discusses green lifestyle advertising, offering two contrasting case studies: entertainment-oriented Aotearoa New Zealand energy television advertisements and more technical and information-rich advertisements featured in Australian household sustainability magazines. The chapter initially provides theoretical context for such studies, considering advertising in terms of the advertising industry, promotional culture, and the ways that the texts of advertisements generate meaning and facilitate identity formation, as well as a discussion of green advertising. Chapter 5 explores Eco-reality Television, locating it within the broader contexts of the genre of reality television with a particular discussion of the roles of the hosts and the ordinary participants of such programmes. The chapter offers an analysis of the eco-build episodes of the popular *Grand Designs* programme and the Aotearoa New Zealand programme, *WA$TED!* Chapter 6 examines celebrities and environmental activism, initially discussing the cultural power of celebrities and the roles of celebrities in environmental activism. The chapter then offers two case studies: an analysis of *Hugh's War on Waste*, featuring the television chef and food campaigner Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall, and also an analysis of a campaign that was fought *in response to* the environmental advocacy of a celebrity, Ellen DeGeneres. This campaign promoted the virtues of traditional Inuit culture and seal hunting practices through using Twitter and social media to produce 'sealfies,' a play on the power of DeGeneres' famous 'selfie' that was taken during the 2014 Academy

Awards ceremony. Chapter 7 continues this examination of social media by ordinary people in environmental advocacy, exploring how local environmental groups use Facebook to promote group identity and further sustainability in their local community. The chapter offers this case study after initial framing discussion that considers questions of ecological citizenship and online activism, as well as the conceptualisation of the local and the community in everyday sustainability. The conclusion chapter offers an overview of preceding chapters, seeking to bring together the earlier theoretical discussion while highlighting common features across the case studies.

The case studies, then, offer a spectrum of texts produced by mainstream media outlets through to local communities and activist groups. The case studies though do not establish a binary or a hierarchy between forms of mass media and social media: the analysis of *Hugh's War on Waste*, for example, discusses how the television programme uses social media in community promotion and its campaign advocacy. This spectrum of case studies has been presented here because there has been a desire to map a diverse range of media representations of sustainable everyday life. Across the case studies, we see different ways of working through the meanings of sustainable everyday life, from the reportage of the conservative British broadsheet newspapers in Chapter 3, to the strictures of the reality television conventions in *WA$TED!* to the expressions of emotional support on the Facebook sites of the local sustainability groups. We cannot extrapolate from the case studies in any systematic way a preferred type of media or form of discursive presentation: while the discussion about social media across case studies does reveal how ordinary people can exercise agency in the promotion of sustainability, the discussion of some popular television programmes also reveal inspiring stories about sustainable subjects. While the study does not address the modes of consumption of green lifestyle media, it is suggested that this sweep of media incorporate the broad, diverse range of texts that might be accessed in the everyday media diets of individuals. It should also be noted that the case studies are drawn from a number of Western nations, including Aotearoa New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia. The range of case studies will be discussed in Chapter 2 but for now we can declare that the selections have not been made for geographical comparative reasons and that they offer portrayals of everyday life that are commonly recognised in the developed world.

The case studies do though begin to answer the posed question: what does sustainable everyday life look like? Cumulatively, the case studies show a diverse range of practices, relationships, and values that constitute a green lifestyle, and they also reveal different degrees of commitment to sustainable everyday life. Many of the case studies focus on the site of the home. Here, we see scrutiny of energy consumption and production and there are also revelations of wastefulness across a number of case studies, with regard to food waste and the general wastefulness that stems from the overconsumption of everyday consumer activity. The case studies not only critique existing everyday practices but they also provide guidance on how to adopt more sustainable practices, providing knowledge and also addressing the anxiety people feel about how to live in a more sustainable manner. That is, many of the texts analysed are prompted precisely by the problem of outlining what sustainable everyday life looks like. While the home is the primary site where sustainable everyday life occurs, and it is the thematic concern of programmes, the home is presented as linked to the surrounding community, and sometimes the community is invoked and foregrounded as an important site of sustainable everyday life, whether it be a quiet street in Greater Manchester, a community garden in Aotearoa New Zealand, or the countryside of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The range of practices and activities that make up sustainable everyday life is to some degree facilitated by the productive requirements of the media and media formatting. The need to generate a weekly newspaper column or a television series over several years, for example, means that there is simply a diverse range of content that is explored. The complexity of everyday life is dissected to produce different stories ranging from which kind of cleaning product is more environmentally friendly to how should I build an eco-friendly house and where should I place my savings if I want to choose a bank that has good green investment portfolios. That is, there is a harmonious relationship between the productive requirements of the media and the non-determinate content of everyday sustainability. The texts that are analysed here are driven by a desire to represent sustainable everyday life, and there is often a readily identifiable critique of the unsustainability of existing everyday life, but the diversity of ways of living sustainably—in terms of location, financial means, and levels of environmental engagement—generate many different types of representation. Ultimately, the discussion here in this book is driven primarily by recognition that the phenomenon of sustainability is animated by such a variety of representations.

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Auckland, New Zealand — Geoffrey Craig

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CHAPTER 1

Evaluating Sustainable Everyday Life

Introduction

The focus of this book is on the ways that different forms of media represent and make sense of everyday practices and values of sustainability but before we can examine such media texts we need to consider how we more broadly understand and evaluate the subject of sustainable everyday life. Initially, there is a requirement to outline definitions of key terms, such as sustainability and everyday life, or at the very least to highlight how various people differently approach these terms. Such an observation highlights that the terrain of sustainable everyday life is subject to vigorous contestation with different evaluations informed by a range of theoretical and political frameworks. This chapter seeks to show that there is not a singular, preferred evaluation of sustainable everyday life. This is partly because there is no one manifestation of sustainable everyday life and also because sustainable everyday life in modern western nations is 'caught' between participating in the contexts of contemporary existence in global consumer capitalism while also problematising such contexts and attempting to give expression to emergent ways of living. Nonetheless, this chapter—and this book—is motivated by a belief that the site of everyday life *matters* in our individual and collective responses to the climate crisis and the task of moving towards greater levels of sustainability.

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The chapter initially provides an overview of the concept of sustainability, charting the distinction between understandings of 'sustainable development' and more radical understandings of the concept that challenge existing economic systems and expose them as environmentally 'unsustainable.' Importantly, the normative basis of sustainability and its *strength* as an inherently contestable concept is established. Another significant feature of the understanding of sustainability is the way it is informed by the principle of interconnection and constituted through the collection and promotion of material and semiotic networks. The concept of everyday life is then unpacked, observing that it is a grounded phenomenon linked to particular places, most notably the home, but that it is also constituted and given meaning through processes of mediation as we consume and produce images and stories and interact with others. As such, everyday life may be conventionally associated with the private sphere but it is also informed by, and has an orientation to, the broader public sphere. It is noted how the temporality of everyday life—its 'dailiness' and routines—can help facilitate the creation of disciplined subjects and work to naturalise particular value systems but also that everyday life is the place where we can exercise greater degrees of self autonomy. The concept of lifestyles and the practices of ethical consumption are then discussed in the context of sustainable everyday life. Lifestyles are often considered as superficial expressions of identity linked to the appropriation and use of the objects of consumer culture and, as such, subject to critique when considered from an environmental perspective. We also though extend the understanding of lifestyles as more generalised responses to the exigencies of contemporary existence that can facilitate progressive as well as conservative identities and value systems. The limitations and potential of ethical consumption practices are also examined. On the one hand it is observed that forms of ethical consumption direct sustainable behaviour towards *consumption* rather than production, reinforcing our status as consumers, while on the other hand it is acknowledged that ethical consumption is motivated by a critique of consumer culture and an active engagement with forms of production. Finally, the chapter considers how expressions of sustainable everyday life are often exercised as strategies of distinction and how the identity of the subject who is working towards a sustainable everyday life can be captured in the concept of an 'ecological habitus.'

Defining Sustainability

Sustainability can be broadly understood as the ongoing viability of the complex interconnection between the environment and human activity. Sustainability is fundamentally concerned with the nurturing of the health and productive capacity of the environment and all its constituent elements—land and soil, water, air, biodiversity, vegetation, and animal welfare. While there are types of environmentalism that argue that the environment has its own intrinsic value or worth independent of human ends or means of evaluation, most famously expressed in the so-called "deep ecology" movement (Naess 1973), the term sustainability is informed by the belief that we should care for the environment because ultimately it is intrinsic to our human interests. Given that sustainability encompasses both the natural and social realms, it also refers to our modes of living and how they engage with and influence the environment. The nature of this relationship between the environment and the social and economic structures that govern human activity is subject to debate and contestation. We need to understand and evaluate the respective positions on sustainability but we also need to appreciate how sustainability is a process that involves the ongoing negotiation of the meanings of the concept. It is something of a paradox that we need to get sustainability 'right'—the future of the planet no less is involved—but equally that we never finally arrive at sustainability.

Understandings of sustainability are profoundly informed by its temporality: it refers to a future viability while also requiring that our current practices and values are informed by their future ramifications. Alternatively, for some, sustainability harks back to a romantic, non-industrial 'Edenic' state, and this understanding has led some to argue that the term is no longer useful and should be discarded. Steve Mentz (2012, 586), for example, has declared: "The era of sustainability is over." For him, such a statement is based upon an understanding of sustainability as a position of stasis, an unchanging, 'pastoral' view of human and environmental relations, while our current predicaments require a more tenacious orientation towards the environment based upon its growing unpredictable and chaotic character. While there is definitely a need to acquire such a tenacious character in the face of the effects of the climate crisis, it can also be argued that the concept of sustainability *does* encompass a dynamic engagement with the ongoing processes of environmental change. As Wendy Parkins (2016, 457) has written in

response to Mentz: "Surely, just as the circumstances to which sustainability is a response – threats to elements of the environment deemed of value (whether species, landscapes, resources, cultural practices or communities) – are dynamic and shifting, so too must any strategy that seeks to protect those elements be characterized by adaptation, reflexivity, and experimentation." It is the sense of temporality within sustainability that informs its more general usage as an adjective meaning to endure without depletion. People can talk, for example, about the sustainability of propositions and relationships.

Sustainability is a popular term, publicly supported by seemingly everyone from radical activists to multinational corporations, and while such widespread support gives one cause to consider whether the term retains any efficacy, it can also be argued that any term of any significant import is always going to be subject to ideological struggle and the correct political response is not to walk away from such terms but to continue to fight for them. Sustainability is also a fraught term that has been theorised and discussed by a number of academic disciplines, each bringing particular perspectives on the subject (see for example, Cavagnaro and Curiel 2012; Gunderson and Holling 2002; Hardisty 2010; Morse 2010; Neumayer 2010; Thiele 2016). Simply put, for all the differences, this range of work on sustainability considers the interrelationship between environmental, economic, and social development although it is a legitimate criticism of some sustainability work that the environmental imperative informing sustainability is subsumed by particular economic interests. An interdisciplinary academic approach is to some degree necessary to generate the range of knowledge that is required to unpack and explain the complexity of sustainability and environmental change. As Leslie Paul Thiele (2016, 4) succinctly states: "Sustainability is an adaptive art wedded to science in service to ethical vision." In answering the question, 'what is sustainability studies?,' Wood (2011) spans a wide range of critical inquiry, making a strong case for the humanities as a necessary companion of sustainability science, arguing for a system's literacy that "combines the study of social history and cultural discourses with a technical understanding of ecosystem processes" (2011, 5). He also defends science against accusations that its disciplinary rigidity, its decontextualised and instrumentalist approach to knowledge, and its disavowal of complexity and uncertainty, has made it at least a servant in the project of 'modernity' that has *contributed* to the environmental degradation that we now encounter. In response, Wood outlines how those

domains of contemporary science that investigate the environment—biocomplexity or sustainability science—have "abandoned simple causal models and conventional disciplinary specializations for an integrated understanding of the natural world as an open, dynamic system" and that they are "explicitly focused on the dynamic and tightly coupled relations between human and natural systems, recognizing the historical power of human communities as biological agents…" (Wood 2011, 3).

Understandings of environmental sustainability can be broadly classified between a reformist position of environmentalism and a more radical ecologism. With the former understanding a "techno-optimism pervades" (Milne et al. 2006, 804) with the belief that environmental risks and challenges can be overcome without fundamental challenge to existing economic structures through technological advances and prudent economic stewardship. This position on sustainability is captured in contemporary expressions of the 'green economy,' and also in the idea of 'triple bottom line' accounting, where social and environmental costs are incorporated alongside financial results. This reformist understanding of sustainability is often expressed as 'sustainable development.' The term has a complex history and ongoing evolution (see Dryzek 1997, Chapter 7) but it was most famously encapsulated in the *Our Common Future* report in 1987 from the World Commission on Environment and Development, led by Brundtland (1987). In 2011 the United Nations Development Programme provided an updated definition of sustainable development as "the expansion of the substantive freedoms of people today while making reasonable efforts to avoid seriously compromising those of future generations" (United Nations 2011, 2). The 1987 report summarised that: "In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations" (Brundtland 1987, 46). The United Nations has more recently set 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2019). Sustainable development is now a dominant understanding of sustainability, perhaps partly because of its prevalence across mainstream political, media and business discourses with an increasing public consciousness of the threats of climate change. Dryzek notes that environmentalists have been largely displaced by "international organizations, states, and business" (1997, 128) in the evolution of the concept of sustainable development and in his classification of environmental discourses, he defines sustainability as an 'imaginative,'

'reformist' phenomenon, defined against both more 'prosaic' types of 'environmental problem-solving' in liberal democracies and forms of 'green radicalism.'

Not surprisingly, sustainable development has been subject to much critique with charges there has been insufficient scrutiny of the 'unsustainable' production and consumption levels of developed nations and their roles in capitalist and colonialist exploitations of developing nations, too much reliance on modernist assumptions about rationality and processes of scientific inquiry, and ultimately that it privileges the existing economic order over environmental protection (Banerjee 2003; Gaard 2015; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). As Banerjee (2003, 153) writes: "Rather than reshaping markets and production processes to fit the logic of nature, sustainable development uses the logic of markets and capitalist accumulation to determine the future of nature." More generally, Dryzek (1997, 132, author's italics) sharply notes, "sustainable development … involves a rhetoric of reassurance. We *can* have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, social justice; and not just for the moment, but in perpetuity. No painful changes are necessary."

Sustainability though is also employed to describe more fundamental, radical critiques of contemporary industrial society that incorporate issues of justice and equity. As Milne et al. (2006, 805, authors' italics) observe, "definitions of strong sustainability emphasize not just an efficient allocation of resources over time, but also a fair distribution of resources and opportunities between the current generation and between present and future generations, and *a scale of economic activity relative to ecological life support systems.*" Sustainability can be valued because of its inherent transparency, making clear the complex networks that constitute practices and accounting fully for the costs associated with those practices. The profitability of economic activity has been based historically upon a disregard for environmental and other associated public costs and a sustainability stance that makes such costs manifest represents a major challenge to conventional economic frameworks. Radical conceptualisations of sustainability also adopt a more holistic approach, incorporating environmental welfare more fully into the human condition beyond mere economic concerns. Thiele (2011, 5) writes: "Sustainability … prompts us – for very practical reasons – to fully explore humanity's role in the web of life. My argument is that the discourses and practices of sustainability encourage us to understand, appreciate, and engage our ethical, technological, economic, political,

and psychological lives, as well as the ecological and (meta)physical habitats within which we fashion these lives – as nested realms of complex interdependence."

The flexibility and contestability of the meaning of sustainability can be seen in some ways as a weakness, denying the concept any solid ground from which to substantively engage with the reorganisation of socio-economic foundations in response to the climate crisis. Such an argument, however, can be countered by recognition that it is precisely the normative status of sustainability—prompting debate about *how should* sustainability be implemented—that is the source of its power. As Thiele (2011, 12) writes: "The point is simply that sustainability is not a theoretical enterprise aimed at closure; it is an iterated practical exercise. Though well grounded in principles, sustainability – like justice, liberty, or any other ideal – does most of its work through the contested exploration of its meaning and the tentative yet concrete embodiments of its pursuit." The future orientation of sustainability—that includes questions of ongoing survival but also moves beyond this to questions about the *quality* of life for ourselves and succeeding generations—dictates that it be evaluated collectively. As Barry (1996, 119) writes, "such questions cannot be answered scientifically or metaphysically (that is objectively given), but because of their normative content they can only be articulated politically (that is intersubjectively created)." It is true that sustainability can be defined and enacted outside democratic process: when 'sustainability' is reduced to sustainable development it can become a technical measure, subject to non-democratic control through forms of scientific and economic regimes of knowledge and power. More substantively though, sustainability does not have a prescriptive set of measures that define it—there is no definitive content to sustainability. As such, as an inherently contestable concept, it is given shape discursively and it is provided with substance and authority through democratic will formation—through public acceptance of particular understandings of the concept and public mobilisation in the practice of sustainability.

The centrality of media representations of sustainability follows from the normative and discursive basis of the concept. The media are important sites where sustainability is animated through stories and images. There is no inherent virtue in media representations of 'sustainability': media conventions of drawing on and replicating hierarchies of knowledge can result in reproducing the discourses of sustainable development as articulated by leading political and economic sources, and the

media industry implication in capitalist economies gives impetus to the promotion of understandings of sustainability that see it incorporated within existing economic relations of production and consumption. Of course that is the case, but such important and legitimate critiques (that will be undertaken here in this book) need to be supplemented with an understanding of the media as a deliberative, open forum where public expressions of the desirability of substantive expressions of sustainability—its role in community building, its alternative forms of production, exchange, and consumption, its recognition of the value of an attentive appreciation of the surrounding world and other sentient creatures, its pleasures and affect—also occur, as we undertake the precarious and contested process of changing our economies and communities, and the very way we live our everyday lives. The term 'sustainability' therefore retains a utility for studies in environmentalism more generally, and for our study of environmental communication in particular.

Sustainability, Interconnection and Networks

Across different understandings of sustainability and various philosophical approaches to environmentalism, there is a common belief in the importance of the principle of *inter-connection*, between myriad manifestations of human activity, nature, and material objects, and across different levels and types of human relationships. The principle of inter-connection is fundamental in environmentalism. The first law of ecology, according to Barry Commoner (1971, 33), is that "Everything is Connected to Everything Else." Morton (2010, 7) outlines the concept of 'the ecological thought' and forwards the idea of *the mesh* which refers to "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" (2010, 28). As Dryzek (1997, 8) has previously noted, environmental problems "tend to be interconnected and multi-dimensional" and given that they occur "at the intersection of ecosystems and human social systems … one should expect them to be doubly complex." And, as Thiele reminds us, this idea of the inter-connection of phenomena has long been articulated in religious discourse although he also moves beyond interconnection to promote the idea of 'interpenetration' that "asserts that connectedness itself (rather than things existing in connection) constitutes the most fundamental reality" (Thiele 2011, 18).

The principle of inter-connection in environmentalism is specifically delineated in the work of Bruno Latour, one of the leading figures

associated with the field of actor-network theory (ANT). Latour has applied the principles of ANT in a specific focus on science, nature, and democracy in his book, *Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004). In this work Latour outlines a conceptualisation of political ecology that involves a destruction of the idea of Nature as a singular, asocial entity that is often invoked in ultimate justifications for much environmental politics. He also deconstructs the objective authority of 'Science' that derives from its claimed ability to provide untrammelled access to, and knowledge of, that singular 'Nature.' Equally, Latour asks us to reconsider the realm of politics: while politics has always been defined through its relationship with nature we can no longer *distinguish* nature from politics. Latour argues that 'nature' and 'society' "do not designate domains of reality; instead, they refer to a quite specific form of public organization" (2004, 53) and instead of a bifurcated structure between Nature and Society, manifested in the 'assemblies' of Science and politics (2004, 15), we need to compose a singular political ecology: "Instead of a science of objects and a politics of subjects, … we should have at our disposal a political ecology of collectives consisting of humans and nonhumans" (2004, 61). That leads us to an understanding of politics as "*the entire set of tasks* that allow the progressive composition of a common world" (Latour 2004, 53, author's italics).

Latour's work (see also Latour 1993) is not about noting the 'social construction' of nature (that implicitly leaves an *a priori*, always pre-existing nature) nor is it a simple matter of more fully incorporating environmentalism into our already existing political systems. Instead, he argues we need to pluralise nature, acknowledging the ways that sciences and other agents become 'spokespeople' for Nature and non-human entities, and compose a politics where such concerns can be expressed and critically assessed. Latour talks of the way that elements of nature, or 'risk-free objects,' were previously conceptualised as 'matters of fact' that were paradoxically understood as agentless but nonetheless influential on a separately constituted social world in times of environmental crisis, and he argues that a new understanding of political ecology should instead posit natural phenomena as tangled, risky objects that yield 'matters of concern.'

Politics of Nature has been criticised because it does not sufficiently investigate and discuss the role of power in the actual political and historical conditions under which such a new order emerges and is negotiated, and also because of its idiosyncratic approach that includes few concrete examples (Wainwright 2005), but nonetheless it does provide a suggestive vision of a sustainable order that comprehensively