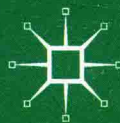


VOICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION



EDITED BY JENNIFER PEEPLES
AND STEPHEN DEPOE

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION
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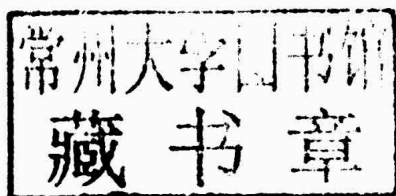
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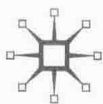
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Voice and Environmental Communication

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Introduction: Voice and the Environment—Critical Perspectives

Jennifer Peebles and Stephen Depoe

Society speaks and all men listen, mountains speak and wise men listen

—John Muir

Clean water, air, and soil. Wild and open spaces. Uncontaminated foods. Healthy bodies and communities. These are some of the scarce resources that come to mind when thinking about environmental issues. And yet there is another limited resource, one that is intricately tied to the environment and yet often not recognized as such: voice. While there is often a cacophony of people talking, what is missing is the acknowledged voice, the one that is given an audience, allowed to be impactful and transformative in its assertions—the one that is heard. As Couldry (2010) warns, voice is in crisis. We daily witness the devastation aided by the loudly expressed agendas of a small minority of people who are able to dictate the environmental outcomes for the majority. As we maintain in this book, as voice goes, so goes the environment.

In the following chapters we explore the ways people give voice to, and listen to the voices of, the environment. Voice is not simply analogous to speaking; it is the “enunciation and the acknowledgment of the obligations and anxieties of living in community with others” (Watts, 2001, p. 180). And in the case of environmental concerns, whose breadth and magnitude affect every living thing on the planet, the circle of “community” is quite large. In the first chapter of his book *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, Cox (2013) lists the individuals and organizations involved in environmental conflict: citizens and community groups, environmental groups, scientists, corporations and business lobbyists, anti-environmentalist groups, media and environmental journalism, and public officials and regulators

(pp. 26–32). Each has a voice and each attempts to find a receptive audience. As our anxieties around our changing environments increase, so too do the number and volume of the environmental voices vying for an opportunity to express their experiences, their beliefs, their fears, their knowledge and their proposals for meaningful change. Nature itself, it may be argued, is speaking through, and perhaps to, individuals who advocate on behalf of various environmental causes.

Our text delves into the multifaceted nature of voice, recognizing that voice is power—it can be given and taken away. It has the capacity to create presence, it is used as a means to oppress or resist, as a response to alienation, and it is the sound of becoming (Watts, 2001). Like the environment, voice is socially grounded and conditioned by its cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts (Brady, 2011, p. 203). Finally, as environmental decisions are always contested and often contentious, voice is the currency of environmental struggle.

Within the communication discipline, there is an implicit understanding of the importance of voice for environment issues. Texts such as Shaiko's (1999) *Voices and Echoes for the Environment: Public Interest Representation in the 1990s and Beyond*; Muir and Veenendall's (1996) *Earthtalk: Communication Empowerment for Environmental Action*, and Killingsworth and Palmer's (1992) *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America* all point to voice's significance. Some specifically address voice, such as Senecah's "Trinity of Voice" essay (2004), while others touch on various aspects of voice found under the broad umbrella of environmental communication. As of now, no volume has taken up the concept of voice as its primary focus. In response, this book explores the multidimensionality of voice in order to understand its functioning given the particular constraints found within environmental issues. Our book is in no way intended to be the final word on this complex subject, but is an effort to illuminate this vital aspect of environmental communication.

As introduction, we lay out five aspects of voice integral to understanding its impact on environmental concerns and that provide a conceptual framework that underlies the arguments that follow. We present examples of environmental scholars who have directly or indirectly incorporated aspects of voice into their scholarship. We end with a preview of the chapters and reflections that expand upon these essential elements of voice.

This book is not only an explanation of voice, but also an enactment of it. In addition to the two editors, we have nine authors writing on specific and diverse enactments of voice and the environment. These

authors are presented in conversation with four noted scholars who reflect on what they have heard in these chapters, providing both an audience for these authors and a means of extending their own thoughts and arguments concerning environmental communication and voice.

Voice and identity

At its most basic level, voice is a physiological process, a mechanism for expressing one's thoughts through sound and action. It is also the "instrument, the vehicle, the medium" for constructing meaning for ourselves and others (Dolar, 2006, p. 4). As Appelbaum (1990) contends, "voice, sound and meaning are so commingled as to make a natural unity" (p. 4). For many, the process of voicing an idea is what allows for understanding, as one is forced to choose one symbol over another in order to assemble a particular perspective.

Voice is also commonly associated with the expression of an opinion or the articulation of a "distinctive perspective on the world" (Couldry, 2010, p. 1). In his analysis, *Why Voice Matters*, Couldry contends that there is one primary purpose for using one's voice: it is the "process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions" (2010, p. 7). We would add that through the practice of giving an account, the speaker is also constructing his or her identity, place, and life experiences. The expression of and the constitution of a life story are intertwined and inseparable throughout the process of giving voice. Couldry concludes with the warning that to deny a person's potential for voice "is to deny a basic dimension of human life" (2010, p. 7).

In environmental movements, individuals with distinct perspectives on the natural world, and the human impact upon it, have shaped how people understand and interact with their environments. But these perspectives might have remained unknown had these impressive thinkers not had equally impressive and distinctive voices for change: the lyrical prose of John Muir, the storytelling of Aldo Leopold (Meine, 1999), the scientific narratives of Rachel Carson, and the sociological articulations of Robert Bullard, among others. Each voice captivated audiences, garnering attention to their influential perspectives. Because of the deep environmental impact of these and other key individuals, communication scholars have investigated how their discourse was able to influence audiences when that of so many other like-minded and equally knowledgeable people was not. Examples of communication scholarship focusing on the voices of environmental advocates include Oravec's work on John Muir (1981), Ullman's examination of

Aldo Leopold (1996), Waddell's edited volume on Rachel Carson (2000), Hope's comparison of the autobiographical voices of Lois Gibbs and Sandra Steingraber (2004), Rosteck and Frentz's essay on Al Gore (2009), Singer's analysis of Thomas Friedman (2010), and Gorsevski's study of the emplaced rhetoric of Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai (2012).

Voice as textual, or intertextual

Voices do not emanate merely from persons, but also from within and between texts; so says literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986). According to Phillips, Carvalho, and Doyle (2012), Bakhtin "understands a voice not just as the medium for speech or the uttered speech of an individual, embodied person, but as a discourse, ideology, perspective or theme that transcends the individual" (p. 7). From this perspective, multiple voices may be present or at work within a single text or discourse (polyphony), and multiple and even conflictual meanings may be discerned based on attention paid to the voice or voices inhering within or among texts (heteroglossia). Extending earlier work on voice to the realm of cyberspace, Mitra and Watts (2002) note that voice "operates as a *sign* of a set of cultural meanings at work in a social body," and "need not be bound to any geopolitical space or social location" (p. 483). Voice in a digital age can be viewed as "synthetic," as a "dialogic event" or "happening" in which the production, dissemination, and reception or "hearing" of voices should be viewed as both "intertextual" and "mediated" (Mitra & Watts, p. 483). Bakhtin's approach allows our understanding of voice to broaden from the ontic (originating in a person) to the symbolic (existing as meaning and meaning-making).

A number of environmental communication scholars have adapted and extended Bakhtin's understanding of voice as a perspective or set of suggested meanings that operates within or among texts. In their landmark book *The Language of Environment: A New Rhetoric*, Myerson and Rydin (1996) coined the term "environet" to describe as an interactive flow of texts and voices unfolding across time and place following a discernible range of issues and events (such as endangered species or climate change). Employing the metaphor of a carnival to depict a dynamic system of changing meanings and connections across a society or community over time, a system comprised of texts and voices, Myerson and Rydin brilliantly foreshadow the ways in which contemporary communication networks produce and circulate words, sounds, images, and voices expressing positions on environmental (and other)

issues. Complementing the macro- or system-level view of Myerson and Rydin, Marafiotte and Plec (2006) examined the presence of diverse viewpoints or voices within discourses of individual people who expressed their views about the natural world through survey responses. In the data, Marafiotte and Plec identified not only multiple voices, but the emergence of new combinations or hybrids of established ideological positions (both anthropocentric and ecocentric) on the environment, and concluded that the presence of both organic (unconscious) and strategic hybridity of voices may help to account for incongruities and conflicts in environmental discourses and debates. Moving from the level of the individual to the group or community, Hamilton (2007) and Hamilton and Wills-Toker (2006) have employed Bakhtin to examine how interactions evolve among participants in various public participation formats pertaining to environmental policymaking, including public hearings and community advisory boards. These authors examined how particular points of view (voices) are articulated and circulated among stakeholders and government officials. This line of inquiry has been extended to the realm of risk and science communication in a recently published work entitled, aptly enough, *Citizen Voices: Performing Public Participation in Science and Environment Communication* (Phillips, Carvalho, & Doyle, 2012).

Other scholars have examined the textual construction of voices by those who are interested more in material acquisition and profit than in environmental protection. Peebles (2005) has examined how pro-business (coined as "wise use") advocacy groups attempt to imitate the voice of environmental advocates in order to thwart or blunt the impact of those opposing views. Plec and Pettenger (2012) have analyzed the ways in which ExxonMobil has projected a benign voice (also referred to as "greenwashing") in their advocacy of various energy solutions that are consistent with their own corporate bottom line.

Voice and social organizing

As with other social, political, and/or cultural controversies, not all points of view in environmental controversies are deemed permissible or significant enough for inclusion. Dissenting voices are separated from decision-makers in "protest zones," demarcated by chain link fences or stricken from public records. For Couldry, the most obvious reason a voice is excluded from a discussion is a practical one: an entity lacks a language with which to articulate its situation. This is especially problematic for those elements of an ecosystem that are not able to express

their circumstances through a human symbol system, a point we will come back to later in this chapter.

The second reason is more complex in that it is structural and systemic. A person must have the necessary "status" if "one is to be recognized by others as having a voice" (Couldry, 2010, p. 7). And status requires an audience. Watts (2012) contends that "voice does not occupy the private body for very long; it seeks a hearing and often 'dies' before receiving one. A condition for voice, thus, is social" (p. 16). For the process to be complete, voice requires "both speaking *and* listening, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of another's narrative" (Couldry, 2010, p. 9). Voice is thus "actualized by public acknowledgment" (Watts, 2001, p. 186).

Couldry warns that voice is also undermined by systems "which take no account of voice" (2010, p. 10). He points to a current crisis where voices "are increasingly unsustainable; voice is persistently offered, but in important respects denied or rendered illusionary" (2010, p. 1). Above all, he argues, "voice is undermined when societies become organized on the basis that individual, collective and distributed voice need not be taken into account, because a higher value or rationality trumps them" (2010, p. 10).

In response to entities that systematically exclude oppositional voices, people with environmental concerns are often motivated to find audiences for their voices outside the formalized strictures of the government processes and other sanctioned acts of public address. It is voice that allows for the formation of organizations and groups, as it functions at the intersection of individuality, subjectivity, and connection with others (Dolar, 2006, p. 4). The social aspect of voice allows for the construction of commonality and community; upon hearing the stories of others, people find similarity with their own lives (Hauser, 1999).

Individuals form social movements, direct actions, and nonprofit organizations to counter the silencing they feel as they attempt to espouse the dire changes they have witnessed in the environment (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2001; Stillion Southard, 2007). Organized political activity related to environmental issues has taken many forms, from referendum campaigns to protests to "eco-tage" in the name of halting harmful industrial projects (Lange, 1990; Shabecoff, 2003). Groups have also taken to organizing around consumer choices, instituting boycotts and "buy-cotts" in an effort to put economic pressure on companies that produce and distribute products whose manufacture and consumption adversely impact the quality of the biosphere, including human and nonhuman indicators (Micheletti, 2003; Pezzullo, 2011).

In recent years, some of the most influential grassroots organizations in environmental disputes have brought together issues of race, socio-economic status, and environmental concerns under the unifying umbrella of environmental justice (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). From "hysterical housewives" to communities of color vowing to "speak for themselves" (Alston, 1990; Zeff, Love, & Stults, 1989), the voices of the margin have been able to change how the public thinks about issues of race and the environment. In their analysis of the use of the feminine style and material militancy in the discourse of the environmental justice movement, Peeples and DeLuca (2006) explore how individuals come together into powerful coalitions capable of altering the grounds upon which environmental decisions are made. Specifically, women involved in environmental justice often describe how they formed organizations after hearing other women voice concerns about their children's health, which resonated with their own experiences. In finding that they were not alone, they were empowered to take action to clean up the toxins in their neighborhoods. One of the strategies these environmental justice advocates use is to unite under the banner of "motherhood" (Peeples & DeLuca, 2006). They argue that no one (no politician, no epidemiologist) has greater knowledge of their children or their communities than they do, establishing their status as experts. As scientific methods often prove inconclusive in issues of toxins, especially in the small sample sizes of some of these communities, the women use their collective knowledge of their children's health and their own body epistemology, along with their community knowledge of dump locations and neighborhood disease clusters, to question the scientific findings that disagree with their own experiences (Peeples & DeLuca, 2006). The successes of environmental justice advocates in raising awareness of these issues comes in no small measure from individuals voicing their lived experiences and using the similarities of those experiences to form organizations able to question the political and scientific authority.

Voice and political process

Voice has a particular significance under democratic governance. Huspek and Kendall define democracy as "a field of discursive struggle defined by political participants competing to get their words and meanings accepted by others in an effort to secure limited material and symbolic resources" (1991, p. 1). It is the variety of voices, stakeholders with competing interests, that (in theory) leads to the best possible

outcomes. “Inextricably bound up with this view is the belief that both democracy and freedom may be diminished, even imperiled, when citizens withhold their voices from the formal political arena” (Huspek & Kendall, 1991, p. 1). Without all the interested voices, debate is limited or skewed, leaders may go “unchecked,” and the impact of an individual’s expression is reduced, as the rhetorical situation may shift away from that person’s concerns. “Withholding one’s political voice, therefore, amounts to a forfeiture of self-determination,” a forfeiture of power (Huspek & Kendall, 1991, p. 1). In addition to individual agency, formal policies, structures, and common practices allow for or deny voices’ ability to influence governmental processes.

In the United States, voice plays a unique and pivotal role in environmental decision-making. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 requires a public review of environmental impact statements for projects that might cause environmental harm. A number of state and federal laws require opportunities be made for the public to participate in the process. This can be in the form of an open comment period or, equally common, a public hearing (Hendry, 2010, pp. 219–236).

While NEPA and related policies present a somewhat unprecedented opportunity for the public voice in environmental decision-making, significant limitations often arise in implementation (Fiorino, 1990). Officials and administrators can view hearings as a waste of time, an antagonistic process, and perceive the public as uninformed or hysterical. The citizen voices can be labeled as “indecorous,” a term Cox (2013) uses to describe the “symbolic framing by some public officials of the voices of members of the public as inappropriate to the norm for speaking in regulatory forums and for the level of knowledge demanded by health and government agencies” (p. 255). Indecorous voices can be officially dismissed or informally ignored. On the other side, the citizen participants (and also some officials) often view the comment period as a charade, the façade of open and inclusive decision-making, with an outcome dictated far in advance of public involvement. Escalation of protest, they argue, is the only available means to make themselves heard, and this provides further evidence of their “irrationality” for officials.

Senecah (2004) proposes a “practical theory” of the Trinity of Voice (TOV) to evaluate a participatory process’s ability to provide agency for citizen voices in decision-making. She maintains that for voice to have impact, or a hearing as stated by Watts (2012), within a given participation format, three conditions must be present: access, standing,