

## Review:

**Robert Cox and Phaedra Pezzullo.**

***Environmental Communication and  
the Public Sphere***

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**E**nvironmental issues have long been the ugly step-sister of news media topics, as well as other communication outlets. When they're not being ignored for the more glamorous, ratings driven Cinderellas of the world, (sports, celebrity gossip news, etc.), environmental topics are often misrepresented, ill-explained, and downplayed for the public. Robert Cox and Phaedra Pezzullo successfully grasp the glass slipper in the most recent edition of their book, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* through a fresh focus not only on the representation of environmental topics and how they should be communicated to the public but also on the way we perceive nature and our own role as a society and individually, within (or without) it.

*Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* provides the reader with a high-level overview of the history of environmental topics, along with a deeper dive into the ways in which they have been—and should be—communicated to the public. Building off the pedagogical works of Kenneth Burke's

'Rhetorical Situation' within environmental studies, Cox and Pezzullo introduce rhetorical tools and expand upon the Shannon-Weaver model of communication to bring across their message. Through these introductions, they inform and influence the reader to challenge the status quo of environmental communication, while identifying the gaps in between necessary to connect with the public.

According to Cox and Pezzullo, the culmination of these communication and rhetorical building blocks are filtered through conceptual 'frames,' per the concept of Erving Goffman, who "defined frames as the cognitive maps or patterns of interpretation that people use to organize their understanding of reality" (62). It is through these frames that Cox and Pezzullo suggest people choose their perception of nature and the issues impacting it (for example, using frames to make mental or emotional associations with environmental problems - or in choosing to ignore them). The authors continue by addressing that throughout history, we have struggled with how we frame (or choose to see) our environment. They begin by delving into the way we have chosen to see nature historically and in relation to ourselves. The initial views of American nature, for example, were far from endearing. "Writing from a European perspective of 'the New World; at Plymouth in 1620, William Bradford incredulously asked, 'What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts & wild men?'"(32). Cox and Pezzullo point out that later, this viewpoint evolves when Americans challenge this concept by choosing to embrace nature as a distinguishing characteristic of the landscape (33-35).

Cox and Pezzullo devote most of this work to pointing out that, whether you choose to see the environment as a maintainable papermill or as a prime resource to coexist within, there is still a need to create effective environmental communication within both communities and popular media. They also attempt to answer some of the more difficult 'why' and 'how' questions that the field of environmental communication often renders when under scrutiny, in a seemingly impartial manner (-e.g. If environmental issues are truly impacting the world as much as scientists say, then why aren't the citizens of the world worried or engaged?). While the authors are unable to provide quick answers, they do give the reader incredibly

valuable suggestions for engaging the public through social activism. One of their most detailed suggestions includes information on creating an environmental advocacy campaign (from defining the difference between planning strategy versus tactics, to zeroing in on even the smallest details, such as how to identify and communicate with “persuadables (members of the public who are undecided but potentially sympathetic to a campaign’s objectives)” (189). Through this section, readers wishing to act as agents of social change are brought into the details of how they might organize themselves (and others) to act.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this work is how it motivates active social engagement without directly asking the reader to become engaged. It merely states how one goes about engaging, step by step, while bringing the reader into the discussion by using both logically and emotionally tugging examples of current environmental problems being faced by citizens across the globe. In *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in Critical Pedagogy*, Ira Shor asks teachers to incorporate the voices of students into their pedagogy, just as many authors before, (and after), him have, in an attempt to give students ‘authority’ in their own learning. In a similar vein, Cox and Pezullo provide the reader with the authority of incorporating his or her voice in environmental communication, while providing a ‘how-to’ manual of sorts. This work swiftly indoctrinates the reader, since they, too, are part of the public being impacted by environmental issues.

As a criticism, the strategies that Cox and Pezzullo set forth for improving communication models within journalism are admirable, but idealistic at best: “Many environmental reporters, themselves, lack training in the issues they’re covering. These issues are often complex, ranging from the depletion of the ozone layer around the earth to the health effects of genetically modified organisms” (94). They go on to explain the nature of how a newsroom functions, with reporters often covering a wide-range of topics they’re unfamiliar with, stating that this is part of the disconnect within environmental media communications. However, as a general rule, journalists are trained to cover a wide-range of topics without having a background in said topic. It’s their primary function to take in complex information

and focus it down for the public. While there are certainly advantages to having dedicated environmental reporters, it's unrealistic for most publications with dwindling budgets and heavy pockets of freelancers focused on covering general topics. Even so, the sections of the book devoted to explaining media processes are beneficial to readers who are unfamiliar with the subject and scholars alike. This knowledge is particularly useful when considering methods to promote community education and involvement.

In sum, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* asks readers to consider their own definition of the environment, while demonstrating the need for better communication about environmental topics on both a local and global scale. Improving communication involves gaining and sharing knowledge about environmental topics in a timely manner, (particularly where risk is involved), as well as taking part in the discussion as an individual. And while Cox and Pezzullo can't give us all of the answers, they've certainly provided a solid starting point.

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