

# COMMUNICATING THE FUTURE



SOLUTIONS FOR ENVIRONMENT,  
ECONOMY, AND DEMOCRACY

W. LANCE BENNETT

# Communicating the Future

For Oliver

# Communicating the Future

Solutions for Environment,  
Economy, and Democracy

W. Lance Bennett

polity

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
Introduction: The Future is Now	1
Overview of the Book	14
1 Communicating Complex Problems	18
2 What's Missing in Environmental Communication?	62
3 Economy vs. Environment: Selling Predatory Economics	91
4 Democracy with a Future: Mobilizing Ideas and Opportunities for Change	121
5 Communicating Change: Attention, Amplification, and Organization	149
<i>Notes</i>	170
<i>Index</i>	187

# Acknowledgments

This book offers a framework for developing more effective political communication, based on principles of transparency and reason, to advance the greatest good for the greatest number of people and other species over the longest run. At the core of the argument is a model of how social movements, political leaders and citizens can develop and spread better ideas to replace environmentally destructive and socially unjust political and economic regimes. I hope this framework will be of interest to scholars, students, activists, and citizens.

Although the book is short in length, it reflects a long and wonderful journey in which I have been enlightened by many people. Many of the ideas here have been informed by exchanges with students and colleagues at the University of Washington, where, over the years, we created a number of learning communities to think about how better to align environment, economy, and democracy. An early project involved John de Graaf, Tim Jones, and dozens of students to explore the question: *What's the Economy For?* This is also the title of a book and film by John, who is one of my favorite renaissance people. Shortly after that, along came Deric Gruen, community activist and organizer extraordinaire, who helped me develop the Rethinking Prosperity project with students, community leaders, and progressive funders. Among other things, we learned a lot about how community organizations and funders can greatly improve (or unwittingly undermine) the capacity and sustainability of their programs for change.

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As I write these words, the world is in the grip of a coronavirus pandemic (named Covid-19 for Coronavirus disease of 2019). It has been challenging to think about the future

when the human toll is so immediate, and the economic crisis looms so large. It is ironic that as economies around the world shut down, demand for oil collapsed and industrial pollution eased; many environmental health indicators improved. This book is an expression of hope that we can find ways to organize our economic and political lives in better balance with the life support capacities of the planet. The world seems both far away and terrifyingly close from our small retreat on a peninsula less than two hours from the complexities of Seattle. It is inspiring to be surrounded by islands, trees, mountains, and water. It seems a good omen that a pair of eagles flew by as I wrote these last words.

Longbranch, Washington, May 2020

# Introduction: The Future is Now

Thinking about the environment and the future of life on the planet is challenging. The daily news is filled with stories about serious threats on so many fronts. At the same time, there is hope in the uprisings of millions of people, all over the world, who demand political action. A surprising leader of millions of young people who protested around the globe was a sixteen-year-old Swedish girl named Greta Thunberg, who left school to hold a one-person strike for climate change outside the Parliament building in Stockholm in 2018. Her eloquence and ability to focus attention on children concerned about their futures soon won her invitations to speak at the United Nations. She is the girl who took a 32-hour train ride from Sweden to the Alps to address The World Economic Forum, and scolded the world elite for flying in on their private jets. Her courage and eloquence won her a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 2019. In a speech before the British Parliament, she said this:

My name is Greta Thunberg. I am 16 years old. I come from Sweden. And I speak on behalf of future generations...

I was fortunate to be born in a time and place where everyone told us to dream big ... People like me had everything we could ever wish for and yet now we may have nothing...

Now we probably don't even have a future any more. Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money. It was stolen from us every time you said that the sky was the limit, and that you only live once.<sup>1</sup>

Students around the world began walking out of school and taking to the streets in a movement they named "Fridays for Future." Anna Taylor, aged seventeen, helped found the UK student climate network and was soon making eloquent statements of her own to the national press: "Those in power are not only betraying us and taking away our future, but are responsible for the climate crisis that's unfolding in horrendous ways around the world." Pointing out that climate change affects those least responsible for the causes, and least able to do anything about it, she also noted that, "It is our duty to not only act for those in the UK and our futures, but for everyone. That's what climate justice means."<sup>2</sup>

For those who believe the overwhelming scientific evidence, an ecological crisis threatens the current human civilization built on fossil fuels, overconsumption of resources, negligent handling of wastes, and a built-for-obsolescence consumer culture. Many animal species beyond humans are threatened as well. We hear most often about global warming, but there are many other earth system breakdowns caused by the runaway industrialization of nature. Frightening cocktails of toxics are found routinely in air, water, soil, and food. Interactions among different environmental hazards multiply present dangers and bring new ones. Precious water supplies are increasingly contaminated by agricultural chemicals, landfill leakage, industrial and human wastes, hydraulic fracking for natural gas and oil, and dozens of other sources. Supplies of clean water in some regions are further compromised by glacial melting due to global heating. The liquidation of vast ice sheets at the poles and Greenland is causing rising sea levels that threaten massive population migrations from coastal areas. Loss of arable land due to draught, deforestation, and soil deterioration threatens famine and even greater human migrations. There is a sixth great species extinction under way, with cascading effects on food supplies, pest populations, and health. Add

X-factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic to this precarious mix, and it begins to be clear how fragile this planetary house of cards has become. For many inhabitants of economically prosperous regions, these multiplying catastrophes once seemed distant and abstract, but now they are hitting closer to home.

There is much magical thinking that technologies such as renewable energy or electric cars will save us, but there is little evidence that they can make enough difference to turn the tide. The hopes placed in Green technologies are understandable, but most of them have hidden resource costs and limited potential to support continued economic growth on a global scale. One way or another, we are near the end of a centuries-long economic binge that has witnessed the harvest and waste of resources well beyond anything that can be renewed and absorbed by planetary capacities. Even before the global economic shock of Covid-19, we were approaching a great moment of truth and choice between staying on the same catastrophic economic path or transitioning to more livable outcomes for people and other species in regions facing different local versions of the crisis.

Rather than hide from the future and suffer the worst-case disasters, perhaps we can imagine futures based on values such as: rebuilding communities, making products with more lasting value, reducing unproductive financial speculation, rewarding socially productive – if less profitable – investment in education, health, and other public services, and creating work that provides decent lives. This will require adjusting obscene inequalities in wealth so that the rich and powerful live closer to the realities inhabited by the rest of us and come to see that we share a common fate. Achieving this best-case scenario requires developing and communicating positive visions of change that motivate political realignment behind a new economics. This is no easy task, but it is possible with a more unified politics and the communication strategies to spread ideas and promote policies.

Millions of protesters around the world have drawn public and political attention to the planetary extinction crisis. After making the environment a more pressing concern, the important political question at this point is: What do we do now? That question is the focus of this book. The answers

offered here involve changing how we think, communicate, organize, and act. It may be surprising to learn that this is not as difficult as it sounds, because this is an argument for bringing our communication processes and politics more in line with the nature of the problems we face.

The path to more effective political action involves communicating about economics, politics, and environment, together, in ways that offer more appealing images of change than commonly associated with proposals for carbon taxes or radical sacrifices in how we consume and live. Various personal adjustments will surely come at some point down the road, but this is the wrong end of the problem to emphasize now. Many people are already living at the margins, both north and south, and there is little to gain from making the road ahead seem even worse. Broad public support for positive change is needed to pressurize political parties in democracies for better policies that package equity and environment together.

Finding ways to develop and spread ideas that might actually make a difference is challenging for many reasons, including: resistance from short sighted business interests; caution from parties and governments captured by those interests; and disinformation from growing rightwing movements that have mobilized large publics against many progressive policies, including climate change. Rightwing organizations in Europe and the US even found a German teenager named Naomi Seibt to play the role of the “anti-Greta” on YouTube, in publications, and at conferences in the US and Europe.

It is easy to blame the lack of decisive progress on the environmental crisis on business interests, timid politicians, the noise from popular movements, and leaders on the radical right. While those factors loom large, it is also time to put the spotlight on the millions of concerned citizens, environmental organizations, and aligned activists who have done an excellent job sounding alarms and winning small victories but continue to lose the larger fight for a more livable future. Those calling for change are majorities in many nations. It is time for us all to change our thinking about the role of communication in building stronger political action networks

that can develop and spread clearer ideas about more livable societies. And we need to understand how transformative ideas acquire the clarity and commitment to fuel movements that resonate with publics and politicians.

At the core of the problem is how we routinely communicate about complex problems like climate change and the many other symptoms of environmental collapse that intersect with critical life spheres such as economics and politics. The language and logics that we encounter in news accounts, from experts and politicians, and in everyday conversations, tend to chop big problems up into small solutions that don't add up. And even those approaches often employ backwards thinking that focuses on treating symptoms rather than underlying causes. It turns out that many communication scholars and practitioners also approach complex problems with relatively narrow communication models based on message framing, audience targeting, or trying to set political and media agendas. Even when these strategies are successful, the resulting proposals mainly address environmental symptoms such as reducing carbon emissions, rather than focusing on underlying economic causes of continuing rising economic demand for fossil fuels. Better communication entails recognizing that complex problems typically have intersecting causes: for example, environmental problems are fundamentally economic and political in nature. The challenge is to develop simple models that enable better communication about this.

Rather than continue to reproduce communication that does not work well, we now have the capacity to understand and shape how transformational ideas flow in societies. We can explain a good deal about dense flows of content that involve rich mixes of images, memes, political slogans, scientific evidence, narratives, and the media influencers who bridge, filter, or block idea flows across different networks. We can use these understandings to help civil-society organizations, movements, concerned citizens, and politicians better coordinate the production, packaging, and networking of game-changing ideas. Communication scholars can find new ways to assemble old concepts, and add a few new ones, with the aim of better understanding how networked communication processes engage and organize people in complex media ecologies.



In short, the challenge for positive political change is not so much what to do about the radical right; in most democracies they are greatly outnumbered by citizens concerned about the environment and economic failures. Even business resistance is beginning to soften in some sectors, and investors are finally figuring out that oil stocks may not have such a bright future. The challenge ahead is for environmental, new economy, and political reform organizations (and their funders!) to develop more coherent ideas that offer positive visions for a more sustainable future. Unified movements spreading those ideas can engage voters and help leverage political parties to take action. If these things happen, then attractive packages such as The Green New Deal will be filled with truly transformative ideas.

*Communicating the Future* is not a book that invents new proposals for building a better world. There are plenty of good ideas about economic and democratic reform already in circulation, many dating back more than half a century. If simply writing about good ideas caused social and political change, we would not be in the current mess. The main focus of the book is on what has been missing: a simple model that citizens, organizations, and communication scholars can use to think and act differently about a set of problems that current approaches are failing to solve. This model of how ideas flow in society shows how think tanks, activist organizations, funders, and engaged publics can: (a) develop communication processes that (b) better enable diverse groups in different societies (c) to build stronger networks with common agendas, (d) that gain support in elections and policy processes, and (e) receive uptake from political parties and governments. Until these things happen, the reactionary right will continue to outperform the radical left in elections, and parties on the center left (e.g. European Social Democrats, US Democrats) and the center right (e.g. Christian Democrats) will continue to drift.

To aid the reader's thinking about building more effective models of political communication, the book shows how other transformative ideas have traveled in society and into politics. For example, Chapter 3 traces the origins and spread of the core principles of the currently dystopian economic

system of global, deregulated, and ecologically predatory capitalism. The current economic operating systems in most nations will continue to defeat efforts to treat the multiplying environmental symptoms until coalitions of different stakeholders develop and implement more attractive alternatives. The aim is to show how those already concerned about the future can develop ideas about more equitable and ecologically sound societies and organize more effective politics to guide the transitions.

A place to start is with assessing the ever-expanding lists of specific issues that do not add up to a compelling vision for change: save the polar bears, stop oil drilling in the Arctic, protect the old growth forests, quit mining coal, stop burning the Amazon, tax carbon, build more renewable energy, and on and on. As our failing economic and political practices create more and more problems, it is easy to understand why so much energy is focused on trying to deal with them all. However, as noted earlier, the politics attached to all of that issue-specific communication generally ends up fighting the symptoms of an economic system that spews more new problems than any amount of issue-by-issue action can fix. Moreover, all of those worthy causes compete against each other for attention, empathy and action.

The logic of issue fragmentation in much of our political communication is, of course, reinforced in most democracies by governmental policy processes that compartmentalize issues in different legislative and bureaucratic sectors. Many of us live in democracies shaped after World War II, with institutions built on assumptions that socioeconomic systems were working fairly well, and that policy processes should address relatively narrow categories of things that required adjustments. As a result, civil-society organizations with lobbying capacities are pushed to develop political strategies to fit their issues into available political slots, and, above all, to “be realistic” in order to get a seat at the bargaining table. But so far, being realistic has not produced success beyond occasionally making the problems less bad. The legacy of “being realistic” has resulted in the reality that nineteen of the twenty hottest years ever recorded occurred in the first two decades of this century. Much of this heat is absorbed by the oceans, where water temperatures are also the highest in

recorded history. There is a great species extinction currently in progress. And, despite gains in renewable energy, the global demand for fossil fuels continues to grow, driven by government subsidies in many nations for the coal, oil, and gas extraction needed to run economies that cannot function on renewables as currently configured. In 2019, Oxford dictionaries declared “climate emergency” the word of the year. Perhaps a better framing for the problem would be “economic emergency.”

The political fragmentation that undermines movement coherence is also reinforced by the funders of cause organizations. Most funding programs encourage activities centered around specific issues, from saving birds and other endangered species, to figuring out how to grow food in increasingly marginal environments. Private and public funders that support civil-society organizations must find ways to introduce broader connectivity among their funding networks and provide incentives for organizations to cooperate in developing more broadly shared visions.

In short, it is time to rethink movement politics so that diverse factions can share common economic critique and renewal strategies, and march under fewer banners. It is good to remember that alarms about the relentless industrialization and degradation of nature have been sounded continuously by growing numbers of movement organizations, citizens, and scientists since at least the middle of the last century. Over the decades, the modern environmental movement, though loosely organized, has grown into the largest continuing expression of citizen concern and outrage on the planet. This book addresses the challenge of what to do after sounding the alarm. It is important to understand both how communication has contributed to the current crisis, and that we can learn to develop and share more effective ideas about more sustainable economies and societies.

Beyond the millions of schoolchildren and “extinction rebels” focusing public attention on the future, there are promising signs of public readiness to act. For example, opinion trends in the US show solid majorities favoring more effective environmental action even if it slows economic growth.<sup>3</sup> But where are the appealing ideas, or the cohesive

movements and voter publics that share those visions? And how can emerging political idea networks include more politicians, parties, and governments able to lead positive transitions toward better futures?

Despite many decades of activism and rising public concern, there are few widely shared visions of how people in different places can live well without destroying nature. To be clear: there are good and impressively documented ideas about how we can live differently and happily, but they have not yet become the focus of communication from large networks of prominent organizations working for change. Instead, we hear calls to stop eating meat, curb consumerism, or curtail travel. While such changes might help, many of the practices they attack are deeply embedded in many societies and cannot just be pulled out of the middle of people's lives. Until such proposals are supported by more comprehensive plans that contain motivating visions of better ways of living, they will not gain the political uptake required to make a difference. As a result, the burden of change is often left up to individuals, who cannot organize change on the scale that is required.

A place to start is with learning how to develop, share, and amplify ideas that offer alternatives to currently dominant practices and their rationalizations. For example, there are many fragmentary movements and organizations producing sound alternatives to dominant thinking about the necessity of economic growth promoted with little consideration about what kinds of growth with what kinds of social benefits. The common prayer for economic growth has become the secular religion of our time. Yet the idea of engineering economic growth is a relatively recent historical invention that emerged, with theories and methods attached, in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Earlier economic thinking regarded growth as an incidental byproduct of more fundamental economic relations and outcomes. Nevertheless, the growth hype quickly promised a singular vision of prosperity that was conveniently blind to the costs, both human and environmental, that became built into our everyday cultures.

And so, we live with a daily backdrop of media cheer-leading for growth, pronouncements from economists who

serve as the high priests of our secular economic religion, and daily consumer propaganda to buy more stuff. Sadly, this is a false religion. Kenneth Boulding, a prominent economist and environment advisor to US President Kennedy in the 1960s, once quipped: “Anyone who believes in indefinite growth in anything physical, on a physically finite planet, is either mad or an economist.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, economist James K. Galbraith has observed that: “Postwar neoclassical growth theories deliberately ignored resource and environmental limits, disparaged and disdained ecologists, and promised what was effectively impossible: perpetual growth, fueled by unlimited resources, the free disposal of wastes, and never-ending technological progress. Early warnings ... [about environmental limits] ... were ridiculed. More recently, the science of limits has gained acceptance, but most economists remain preoccupied with growth.”<sup>5</sup> It is ironic that the basis for spreading the gospel of growth in the last century has evaporated in economies racked by inequality, austerity, and debt. While it was once fashionable to think that a rising economic tide lifts all boats, Galbraith quipped that, today, “a rising tide lifts only yachts.”<sup>6</sup>

The good news is that opportunities for change are present. The world economy was already struggling on artificial life support (i.e. debt-driven growth) before the Covid-19 pandemic. The resulting shutdown of national economies produced shocks that invited a return to greater government management of economies based on concerns about public welfare. But what should governments do? There is even good news on this front: many creative ideas already exist for how to build “circular” or “steady state” economies, as discussed later in the book. These ideas aim to bring systems of production, distribution, consumption, and waste management into better balance with life-support systems on the planet. The time is ripe to fashion a new set of life stories from these ideas. In order to make a difference, a broad spectrum of organizations must develop the capacity to design, package, and promote more common visions of economic and political change.

Even though the opportunities for political renewal are growing, political parties have been slow to take advantage of them – at their own peril. Polls and election results in nations