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## Response Essay: The (Im)possibility of Voice in Environmental Advocacy

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Few in the field of environmental communication would contest that society faces a number of impending anthropogenic threats to the planet. Currently national attention may be most focused on the approaching climate crisis due to greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. As of this writing, climate change and environmental activists from the Sierra Club to 350.org to Greenpeace to Idle No More are calling on their supporters to fight the proposed Keystone XL pipeline that would transport crude oil from Canada and North America to refineries in the Gulf Coast. Opponents suggest that the Keystone XL project not only facilitates extraction of “one of the dirtiest, costliest, and most destructive fuels in the world” (National Wildlife Federation, 2013), but also represents “game over for the climate” in terms of efforts to control CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to stem global warming (Hansen, 2012). Despite the scientific consensus on climate change and knowledge of what has to be done to prevent further global warming, climate activists have struggled to find a compelling voice that will persuade skeptical publics and intractable politicians to take action. More broadly, despite the findings that 64% of Americans believe that environmental protection is more important than economic growth (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Smith, 2011), environmentalism in its many manifestations has struggled and continues to struggle to find broad support for individual, institutional, and societal changes to mitigate environmental problems.

The chapters in this section suggest that there is a *crisis of voice* in environmental advocacy. Yet, voice has, for the most part, been overlooked in scholarship concerning environmental advocacy and

activism. What became clear to me in reading these chapters, however, is the importance of the concept of voice for thinking about the future of environmental advocacy. Drawing from both Nick Couldry's (2010) and Eric King Watts' (2001) work on voice, the chapters highlight that voice is not just an individual process of accounting for one's experience but is an ethical process that takes place within communities. Efforts to better understand the voice(s) of environmental advocacy, such as these chapters, have significant scholarly and practical implications for environmental advocacy that seeks to create sustainable communities and respond to environmental crises.

The main question that arises for me from these chapters is seemingly simple and admittedly practical: what are the constraints and possibilities for the voice(s) of environmental advocacy? In the remainder of this chapter, I will reflect on how the chapters led me to this question and offer suggestions for further research that can enrich the examination of voice as a heuristic for environmental advocacy. I will begin with a discussion of the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy. Then, I will reflect on the signs of the crisis and potential solutions. Finally, I will introduce some topoi for future research that take up the possibility of voice for environmental advocacy.

### **The crisis of voice in environmental advocacy**

In their identification of corporate ventriloquism, Bsumek et al. draw on Nick Couldry's (2010) argument that we face a crisis of voice due to the dominance of neoliberalism, a form of discourse that reduces politics to the implementation of market functioning. Couldry contends: "We are experiencing a contemporary crisis of voice, across political, economic and cultural domains, that has been growing for at least three decades" (p. 1). Reading the chapters in this section, particularly Bsumek et al.'s engagement with Couldry, and then reading Couldry's book refocused my thinking about environmental advocacy and environmental social movements to pay more attention to questions of voice. These chapters helped me to see a crisis of voice in environmentalism and environmental advocacy. By this, I mean that environmentalism—a voice made of many voices—is struggling to find a voice, or voices, of environmental advocacy that can effectively address the many environmental crises we face. Without discounting the successes of particular environmental movements and advocacy campaigns, the collective voice(s) of environmental advocacy have not yet achieved widespread success in persuading publics and governments to adopt the large-scale

(local, national, and international) behavioral and political changes that are needed to ameliorate complex problems like climate change. Of course, this broad assertion is more complicated than simply finding the most effective messages, especially considering that there are many definitions of success and effectiveness within environmentalism. My assertion raises many additional questions about the role of voice in environmental advocacy. I intend to return to some of these complexities and questions later in the chapter. For now, I will start with explaining how the chapters in this section brought me to reflect on the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy.

From the chapters, we see both signs of the crisis and signs of possible solutions for addressing the crisis. Both Belanger and Bsumek et al. reveal signs of the crisis of voice for environmental advocacy by highlighting strategies that are used to perpetuate anti-environmental voices. Belanger reveals how Michael Crichton, who denounces climate change as a conspiracy created by politicized radical environmentalist scientists, has cultivated a voice that has achieved relative success in perpetuating climate skepticism. Bsumek et al. divulge corporate ventriloquism as a form of voice employed by corporations to uphold neoliberalism and argue for the continued necessity of coal to Americans. Corporate ventriloquism is not just an oppositional voice to environmental advocates pushing for decreased reliance on coal and other fossil fuels; more importantly, Bsumek et al. carefully demonstrate how it upholds the system of neoliberalism that inherently limits the possibility of voice beyond those that uphold the economic logics of neoliberalism. These two chapters, then, highlight powerful voices that stand in opposition to the voice(s) of environmental advocates and the challenges faced by environmental advocates seeking to persuade audiences of the need for adopting more environmentally sustainable practices. The relative success of these voices also gives hints about the failures of the voice(s) of environmental advocacy.

Beyond demonstrating what I argue are signs of the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy, the chapters in this section also offer potential solutions through examples of potentially consequential voices. Schmitt's examination of how the hegemonic construction of the Ecological Indian can be appropriated by American Indians as a way to find a credible voice in environmental decision-making reminds me of the value of re-appropriation as a tactic. As I will discuss in more detail later, this raises the question of how re-appropriation may serve as a response to the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy. On a broader scale, Prody and Inabinet's chapter calls for rethinking rhetorical theory to account for sustainability for future audiences. With

the concept of an Intergenerational Audience, they offer a normative rhetorical concept that creates a voice for sustainability and future generations and an example that demonstrates the possibility of this concept as a tactic for environmental advocacy. In these chapters, we see potential solutions for addressing the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy.

This initial bifurcation of signs of the crisis and signs of solution provides a useful, albeit simplistic, starting point for examining the constraints and possibilities for the voice(s) of environmental advocacy. In the next two sections, I offer some further reflection that both builds on the chapters and draws from additional examples.

### Signs of the crisis

A sign of the crisis of voice for environmental advocacy can be seen in the manufactured controversy (Ceccarelli, 2011) over climate change in the face of the unprecedented scientific consensus that global warming from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions is happening. Belanger examines how climate skeptics, such as Michael Crichton, have succeeded in creating a credible and successful voice “to mobilize doubt in the face of empirical evidence” (this volume, p. 47). He asks, “Why does Crichton (an expert science-fiction author) find a sympathetic audience in an arena beyond his area of competence when others with genuine expertise in environmental science do not?” (this volume, pp. 45–6). Through rhetorical maneuvering between patronizing and populist voices, Crichton is able to present climate change as a fabrication put forth by dogmatic scientists-turned-conspirators corrupted by radical environmentalist thinking. Crichton is not the only voice of climate skepticism. Political and corporate interests intentionally cultivated a controversy about climate change based in uncertainty (Banning, 2009), thus creating a voice that has since been taken up by numerous politicians, journalists striving to present both sides, and members of the general public to oppose a broad range of climate mitigation policies.

Even with a scientific consensus behind them, environmental advocates are struggling to find a voice that can effect change. As it is becoming increasingly clear that the voice of a scientific consensus is not sufficient to motivate action, what competing voices are available for resisting the seemingly compelling voices of uncertainty and skepticism? While Belanger’s project is aimed at understanding how the voice of climate skepticism has been successful with certain audiences, this is only one step toward addressing the crisis of voice. If we are invested in scholarship that can have practical implications for advancing the

voice of environmental advocacy, then we need also think about how to construct strategies that respond to manufactured controversy, climate skeptics, and other compelling anti-environmental narratives.

Bsumek et al. turn their attention to the way that corporations create a guise of voice that seemingly celebrates voice while actually undermining it. Corporate ventriloquism is just one example of the crisis of voice in the neoliberal age in which corporations hold powerful voices and have the power to create astroturf voices that bolster neoliberal values while simultaneously excluding the possibility of certain voices. Bsumek et al. explain “corporate ventriloquism is a way of recognizing voice under conditions of neoliberalism—but it is a voice that, in reinscribing neoliberal ideology, is not really a voice at all” (this volume, p. 38). Corporate ventriloquism, then, represents a potentially dangerous trend in the construction of corporate voices that then constrain the possibilities for environmental advocacy. Again, understanding the rhetorical workings and engaging in critical evaluation of corporate ventriloquism is valuable in understanding the constraints faced by environmental advocates and the strategies that have been successful in persuading certain audiences to continue to accept anti-environmental messages. Yet, there is also a need for research that takes our understanding of these strategies and uses them to better understand how the voice(s) of environmental advocacy might resist. While Bsumek et al. recommend foregrounding the value of voice as one way to resist corporate ventriloquism and other forms of appropriation, I wonder about the potential in appropriating corporate and neoliberal discourses and re-appropriating corporate ventriloquism and astroturfing into environmental advocacy. Certainly, recent emphasis on Natural Capitalism (e.g., Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 2000) and other market-based mechanisms to account for environmental externalities are examples of voices of environmental advocacy that work with the discourse of neoliberalism. Further research might help us flesh out the enabling and constraining consequences of environmental advocates working within the discursive systems that seem to be more successful with wider audiences.

Thinking about ways in which corporate ventriloquism creates a guise of voice led me to think about the guise of deliberation that occurs in many participation processes for environmental decision-making. Another sign of the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy can be seen in exclusionary processes that limit a diversity of voices from contributing to public deliberation about environmental controversies. Public participation scholars have detailed the ways in which

decision-makers often create a guise of deliberation that gives the appearance of an open process of public participation while actually relegating public voice to pro forma public hearings once a decision has already been made (e.g., Depoe, Delicath, & Elsenbeer, 2004). J. Robert Cox (1999) goes further, arguing that public participation processes often construct certain voices as indecorous or inappropriate, which “functions to dismiss the epistemic standing of citizens and thus their ability to critique corporate or institutional claims” (p. 22). This indecorous voice, while allowed to speak, is constructed as always already out of place. Resultant decisions often claim to have given voice to environmental advocates opposing or seeking more sustainable solutions but ultimately go forward with plans that have potentially devastating environmental consequences for the local land community (Cox, 2013). Indeed, one of the fears of the opponents of the Keystone XL pipeline is that the State Department’s public comment period will follow this model that seemingly values public voice while excluding it from the actual decision-making process. Through documenting the ways that decision-making processes exclude often marginalized public voices, these scholars highlight the institutional constraints on the voice of environmental advocacy.

All of these examples reveal how external forces—individuals, groups, corporations, and institutions that we might think of as outside the bounds of environmentalism—create conditions that limit the voice of environmental advocates and contribute the crisis of environmental advocacy. Though not always overtly antagonistic to environmental sustainability, these forces represent challenges that environmental advocates must contend with in constructing a credible, believable, and ultimately persuasive voice for enacting the behavioral and political changes needed to address the environmental problems from climate change to species loss to toxins. Identifying signs of the crisis and more specifically the specific strategies that are used to perpetuate anti-environmental voices and stifle environmental advocates is crucial. Yet, we need to move beyond critiques of the system and start thinking about how our critical attention to these strategies can have practical implications for developing tactics of resistance. For instance, researchers might ask: can or should environmental advocates appropriate the same or similar strategies that seem to be working to advance anti-environmental discourse?

As I reflected on these chapters and the crisis of voice for environmental advocacy, it became clear that the signs of the crisis couldn’t be solely attributed to external forces. As environmental communication

scholars continue to examine the role of voice in environmental advocacy, we must also consider the ways in which the voice(s) of environmental advocacy may be confused, constraining, or even possibly damaging to creating the conditions for substantial change. Indeed, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus' (2004) report on "The Death of Environmentalism" sparked an ongoing debate within environmental advocates about the appropriate voice of environmentalism and environmental advocacy. Calling out an older version of environmentalism for being too apocalyptic, defensive, and lacking compelling vision, Shellenberger and Nordhaus advocate for a change in voice, a more positive environmentalism based in an inspiring vision of hope and idealism that can reach broader audiences. Whether or not this new vision is the answer for environmental advocacy, it sparked an intense debate within environmental advocates about the appropriate or most effective voice of environmental advocacy. This debate reveals that the conversation cannot simply be about the external constraints on environmental advocacy. There are numerous challenges that come from within the broad ranks of the environmentalism movement. Environmental justice advocates have indicted the environmental movement as an exclusionary, white, upper-class voice (see for example: Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). Further, when the voice of environmental advocacy is focused on individual consumer choices (such as buying a Prius or expensive organic products) does it not uphold the values of neoliberalism and consumerism that are arguably at the root of environmental crises? In other words, part of the crisis may stem from internal tensions within environmentalism about the causes, solutions, and definitions of environmental crises. While the chapters in this section move our thinking forward in terms of highlighting dominant voices that must be challenged, they do not delve into what might be harder to answer questions about negotiating the concept of voice within environmental advocates.

### **Potential solutions**

What potential solutions for the crisis of voice of environmental advocacy can we glean from the chapters in this section? Schmitt's analysis of the Ecological Indian reminds us that re-appropriation has resistive and empowering potential, that people can find voice through positively adopting the names and frames used to marginalize them. As Schmitt suggests, "some Native Americans have found a means of re-appropriating their own image from Euro-American culture, making the imposed role of the Ecological Indian a source of empowerment

and engagement in the public sphere” (this volume, p. 67). In what ways might environmental advocates find similar opportunities to re-appropriate stereotypes toward empowerment and resistance?

Thinking beyond the reclaiming of negative symbols into positive symbols, some environmental advocates are asking the question of how environmentalism might appropriate the successful framing strategies of conservatives in order to broaden its appeal. What are the opportunities for environmental advocacy to appropriate the discourses of neoliberalism and conservatism toward empowerment? Is it possible to respond to the external signs of the crisis mentioned above through forms of appropriation?

Though he does not use the term appropriation, George Lakoff (2010) argues that the environmental movement needs to reframe its message in ways that connect with core progressive values, effectively appropriating the value-based strategies that have been so successful for conservatives. This sort of framing shift is also at the heart of Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ advocacy of a more positive idealistic environmentalism that connects with staple issues for U.S. Americans such as jobs and the economy. They argue: “Conservative foundations and think tanks have spent 40 years getting clear about what they want (their vision) and what they stand for (their values)... If environmentalists hope to become more than a special interest we must start framing our proposals around core American values” (2004, pp. 32–33). Can we view Lakoff, Shellenberger, Nordhaus, and others as a promising sign for the voice(s) of environmental advocacy? Have they hit upon a form of voice that has more potential to persuade broad audiences and effect change? Honestly, I am not sure. In line with Robert Brulle’s (2010) criticism of these approaches, I am skeptical of this approach’s ability to fundamentally challenge the logics of neoliberalism, consumerism, and progress that underlie environmental crises. And, yet, there may be pragmatic value in appropriating a type of voice—a value oriented voice—that seems to resonate with broad audiences. Again, this may reflect longstanding tensions within environmentalism about the best or most effective means to achieving change. While the chapters in this section do not offer an answer, they demonstrate the power of voice as a concept that allows for a deeper analysis of the tensions within environmentalism.

Another positive sign comes from reimagining rhetoric to account for the sustainability of future generations. Prody and Inabinet contend that “existing approaches to advocacy need to be re-envisioned for our present dilemma” of environmental crises (this volume, p. 88). They introduce the concept of the Intergenerational Audience, an extension

of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's Universal Audience that accounts for an ethical commitment to sustainability, as a normative rhetorical model that gives voice to sustainability and future generations in contemporary deliberations about environmental issues. This model's potential is revealed in the case of the speech given by Severn Cullis-Suzuki at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Despite the power of the speech and its renewed popularity on YouTube and despite the promise in the Intergenerational Audience model, the challenge remains in the application of the model to contemporary environmental controversies. As Gardiner (2006) notes, climate change and other environmental problems are difficult to solve precisely because it is difficult for people to think in intergenerational terms. Future research on this and other models designed to give better voice to environmental sustainability will need to address the practical implications and the rhetorical consequences of messages created through this model. In short, will messages created using the Intergenerational Audience be successful in advancing the types of changes needed to achieve environmental sustainability?

Finally, the concept of voice itself holds promise toward imagining alternatives. Couldry's (2010) discussion of voice as value recognizes the importance of organizing society around the value of diversity of voices. Though it may be daunting to think about a way out of the neoliberal crisis of voice, future research should also engage with questions of how to create conditions that allow for the fruition of voice as a value. Bsumek et al. note, "Foregrounding the importance of voice, and reimagining social organizing principles around the importance of valuing voice, offers one way to connect advocacy with critiques of the ideological and rhetorical rationales that enable structural imbalances in the political economy of voice" (this volume, p. 40). The challenge for environmental communication scholars is to think both about the conditions that constrain voice and about practical ways to enable voices that can resist hegemonic forces and persuade to widespread collective action to address environmental crises.

### **What voice(s) for environmental advocacy?**

While there are many themes and future directions that one might draw from the chapters in this section, they act as a starting point for a much-needed scholarly conversation about constraints and possibilities for the voice(s) of environmental advocacy. This conversation

will require much collective effort from environmental communication scholars asking a variety of questions and examining a variety of case studies. Questions include:

- What are the tactics of voice that are most likely to influence the adoption of the broad changes that are needed to address current and future environmental crises?
- How do we define success or effectiveness for the voice(s) of environmental advocacy?
- What are the competing voices of environmental advocacy?
- Is environmental advocacy better suited to a multiplicity of voices or to being constructed univocally?
- To what extent should the voices of environmental advocacy promote structural and/or incremental changes? Individual and/or political solutions? Work within the system and/or advocate for radical change?

In this section, I propose a few topoi for thinking through current and future tactics for environmental advocates to address the crisis of voice.

First, as we engage in research to evaluate different forms of environmental voice, we must recognize that there will not be one single voice of environmentalism that acts as a panacea to the crisis of voice. Rather, as the chapters suggest, there are multiple forms of voice that can be used in particular situations. Steve Schwarze (2006) argues that in certain *kairotic* situations, environmental melodrama is an appropriate frame for mobilizing support for environmental causes. This might be taken as controversial advocacy considering that melodrama has been vilified as a destructive rhetorical frame. Indeed, as noted above, Lakoff, Shellenberger, and Nordhaus called for environmentalism to move away from negative “doom and gloom” messaging and instead promote positive messaging. However, a key point from Schwarze’s argument about environmental melodrama is that there are different frames for different situations. The voice of environmental advocacy, therefore, should not be limited to one monolithic voice such as that advocated in *The Death of Environmentalism*. Rather, a rhetorical approach that takes into account situation, audience, appropriateness, and timeliness may offer the most flexibility for thinking about the voice(s) of environmental advocacy. Although Schwarze did not situate his argument within literature on voice, thinking about melodrama as one tactic of voice for environmental advocates is useful toward understanding the

conditions in which successful voices are created and sustained. As such, a potential area for further research on voice and environmental advocacy is the continued analysis of specific tactics and forms of voice that might collectively guide environmental advocates in making future choices about how to construct credible and hopefully effective voices for change.

In addition to turning critical attention to cases and tactics, the concepts of appropriation and re-appropriation that Bsumek et al. and Schmitt raised in their chapters represent a second area for future thinking about the possibilities for environmental voice. To what extent can appropriation and re-appropriation act as consequential tactics of voice for environmental advocates? Beyond Schmitt's example of the power in re-appropriation of the Ecological Indian voice, we see another example in the re-appropriation of the indecorous voice. In an extension of Cox's (1999) argument that public participation processes hail certain populations as indecorous voices, Kathleen Hunt and Nicholas Paliewicz (2013) argue that publics should embrace the indecorous voice "as a *Kairotic* opportunity for rhetorical invention that renegotiates rhetorical possibilities of public participation" and "imagine the emancipatory potential of indecorum" (p. 3). Hunt and Paliewicz offer examples of publics using the indecorous voice to seize opportunities to disrupt, take time, and invent resistance to unjust participation models. The indecorous voice is a very different tactic than the positive voice advocated by Lakoff, Shellenberger, Nordhaus, and others. One embraces a seemingly negative label and the other attempts to construct positive framing. Considering differing rhetorical situations, however, we cannot say that one mode of voice is better than the other. Research that looks at the opportunities and consequences of appropriation and re-appropriation as tactics of voice for environmental advocacy can help advance our understanding of the conditions in which these forms of voice have the possibility of resonating with audiences and provoking pro-environmental action.

Returning to climate activism and the Keystone XL pipeline, a final area for research might be to think about the recent move to civil disobedience in the climate movement. This move to civil disobedience may be a variant of the indecorous voice in that it embraces a mode of voice that is considered inappropriate. Although civil disobedience is no stranger to radical environmentalism (e.g., Earth First, Sea Shepherds), it has not been traditionally associated with mainstream environmentalism. With the arrest of Tim DeChristopher—also known as Bidder 70—who engaged in civil disobedience by bidding on and

wining 13 parcels of land in an oil and gas lease auction, a turn to civil disobedience was soon taken up by others in the climate movement. During the 350.org and Tar Sand Action Campaign two-week protest at the White House in August 2011, approximately 1200 people were arrested in a planned act of civil disobedience against Keystone XL. More recently, the Sierra Club lifted its 120-year ban on civil disobedience to engage in an anti-Keystone event in February 2013 that resulted in arrests (Sheppard, 2013). Bill McKibben (2013) of 350.org states:

It's no accident that the merging fossil fuel resistance has sent so many people to jail in the last few years. That's because the overwhelming wealth of the fossil fuel industry means we can't outspend them; we need other currencies with which to work. Passion, spirit, creativity. And sometimes we have to spend our bodies.

As this new form of voice for environmental advocacy emerges, we have a significant opportunity to ask questions about the rhetorical consequences of the contemporary voice of civil disobedience in the climate change movement.

These are just a few foci that might guide future research on the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy. There are certainly many more. The importance of the chapters in this section is that they begin what I see as a fruitful and impactful conversation with theoretical and practical implications for the future of environmental advocacy. The concept of voice offers a valuable heuristic for thinking about environmental advocacy and environmental social movements because of its multifaceted focus on voice as both process and ethical commitment. Using voice, we can not only theorize ideal conditions wherein all voices have an opportunity to be heard but also better understand specific strategies and tactics of voice and their rhetorical consequences.

## **Conclusion**

If environmental communication is a crisis discipline and a discipline of crisis (Cox, 2007; Schwarze, 2007), then one of the crises to which we should turn our attention is the crisis of voice in environmental advocacy. Scholars of environmental communication and in particular scholars of environmental advocacy, activism, and social movement should continue to pursue research that helps to promote and create space for environmentalism.

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