

A Handsome Condition: Climate Change and the Problem of Communication

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I want to begin with a line from the 2015 book by Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. Scranton served 14 months in the US Army in Iraq, then he earned a PhD in Literature at Princeton and now is on the faculty at Notre Dame. The piece was originally published as an essay in the *New York Times* – a prominent example of what could be described (please excuse my language) as the “We are fucked” genre of popular environmental writing that has emerged in the shadow of global warming (David Wallace-Wells *The Uninhabitable Earth* would be the most recent entry).

Here is the line:

“The fate of the humanities, as we confront the end of modern civilization,” Scranton writes, **“is the fate of humanity itself”** (109).

By the “end of modern civilization” he means the collapse of the environmental conditions that sustained and issued from the form of society characteristic of industrialized, Euro-American modernity. What a very curious thing to say: that “the fate of humanity” and “the fate of the humanities” are identical under such conditions. We are accustomed to hearing that the fate of humanity is inextricably bound to the fate of science, engineering and technology – such that the integrity of these must be promoted and protected at all costs. As, the young, venerable, courageous Greta Thunberg who recently visited Montreal, puts in on her Facebook page, when we engage in climate activism **“we are just passing on the words of science.”**

But the *humanities* – art, literature, music, history, religion, philosophy, politics and their study – it is upon these that the fate of humanity rests, as the planet burns and the oceans boil? To dwell upon the humanities under present conditions would seem particularly frivolous, even morbid (indeed, Scranton’s point is that only the humanities can prepare us to die, and therefore to live, well).

I want to use my time today to reflect on the status of the humanities under conditions of environmental collapse, including the status of communication, which I would include in the humanities as both a field and as a category of social practice. And I want to set up this reflection by having a look at this clip from the short-lived British television drama *Utopia* (Season 2, Episode 6 - Dennis Kelly/Marc Munden 2014) (to which I was first exposed by my colleague Graeme Macdonald at the University of Warwick): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcx-nf3kH_M

The clip dramatizes what has become a taken-for-granted feature of our current predicament: the disconnect between knowledge and action.

In an ideal world, knowledge and action – what we know to be true and what we do – would be closely connected. They would have an intimate relationship, a direct line of communication,

whereby the facts would bear directly on both motivation and decision: our knowledge would move us to action, and it would inform decisions about what to do. Young Greta Thunberg puts it this way: **“We are just passing on the words of the science. Our only demand is that you start listening to it. And then start acting...unite behind the science: that is our demand.”** The activist group Extinction Rebellion, who will make a presentation on campus later today, lists as its first demand **“Tell the truth”** and **“Act now”** as its second (its third calls for that action to be **“Beyond politics”**). We know the truth that human production and consumption of fossil fuels cause catastrophic global warming and we know that this must stop; we know that immediate and rapid transition to renewables is the answer, so that is what we should do.

Except, in the real world, knowledge and action are not intimate. There is a great distance between them. And in the space between them sits a range of other things through which their relationship is mediated. There’s culture, sense/feeling/emotion (what we call affect), experience, imagination, thought, religion, economy, politics – and, most importantly, there are bodies (human and non-human) and those bodies are located and positioned in diverse ways in relation to the world and to one another, positions and locations that condition what they see and feel and think and what they do.

Whatever connection there might be between knowledge and action, it is mediated by all these things. And these things – like all media – are not neutral. They condition whatever passes through them. They change it. What starts as a straightforward truth at one end results in totally unpredictable action at the other. And these mediating conditions are highly dynamic, volatile, unpredictable, unreliable, and even incalculable. They are (mostly) human things. Their characteristics as unreliable mediators are tolerable so long as the stakes of the connection between knowledge and action are perceived to be low. But if the stakes are high, or even ultimate, then the instability and unreliability of all these mediating factors poses a greater problem.

Under these conditions, when the stakes are high, the temptation arises just to circumvent all of this altogether: to do away with mediation and establish a direct line of communication between the truth and individual and collective action so we can just get on it with and do what needs to be done, before we all perish.

Indeed, there is a long tradition in “Western” thought of exactly this idea.¹ Many will recall Plato’s *Republic* as arguing that the possibility of justice in the world demands the elimination of mediation. It requires perfect communication between knowledge and action, possible only when knowledge and action are combined in a single body – the philosopher-king, the knower-actor – who replaces mediation with method. We might recall here the Allegory of the Cave – in which a young man is confined in a cave filled with the things that mediate our experience together in the world. In the allegory, the boy is loosed from his chains, forced to endure an education that extracts him from the world and leads him, methodically, to apprehend and know the truth of the sun, outside the cave, beyond the world, beyond politics. Now a philosopher/scientist, he is

¹ See Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 9-18.

forced to return to the cave, to the city, to the world, to implement what the truth demands. He finds that the cave remains full of all those mediating conditions – all that culture, all those politics, all those differently positioned bodies, all the images on the wall that people think are real, all the sensations and experiences that move and (mis)inform them.

We know what happens next. In order to achieve justice, he must implement what the truth demands, and to do that he must eliminate culture, politics and art from the equation. He has to circumvent all the distorting mediation. He has to establish a direct, immediate connection between his knowledge of the truth and action. He has to rule. The scientist-philosopher must become king. The truth of justice (as established by the methods he has acquired) simply demands it.

Like watching that clip, this makes me uncomfortable. As a climate activist (like Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion), I want an immediate relationship between the incontrovertible truth about fossil-fuels and global warming and authoritative, effective action into the crisis. As a humanist – especially one who acknowledges the need to diversify and decenter “the human” to reflect the complexity of the world – that prospect inspires considerable unease.

Like the philosopher who loves justice above all else, we are faced with an overwhelming imperative to implement an overriding truth we simply cannot ignore. But we are confronted with a world in which the mediating forces of culture, politics, experience, location, religion and economy (all those human things) are understood to undermine or distort the connection between certain knowledge and effective action. The scale of the problem means we don't have the luxury to tolerate that disconnect. Just as for the philosopher the alternatives were justice or death (his love for the truth was such he'd sooner die than live in an unjust city – and the irrational city would, indeed, kill him) the alternative to implementing what the truth about global warming demands is collective death.

Perhaps what we are confronting is the imperative to circumvent all mediation and simply rule: to tell the truth, to act now, beyond politics.

That is what is dramatized in the clip. What do we have there? We have a woman. It matters that she is a woman and that she is a mother; the gendering of women has always centered around their assigned status as mere bodies – irrational, emotional, passive, reproductive – in relation to the rational, disembodied, active minds of men. She is well-meaning – she is no climate-change denier, and she wants to do the right thing by the environment by taking the bus instead of a plane – but she is finally irrational because she cannot confront the fact that if she was really committed to saving the environment, she would not have had a child in the first place. All those mediating conditions – her body and its maternal instincts; a culture that reinforces those instincts and encourages her to believe that taking a bus will make a difference when it will not; the particularity of her situation and experience as a single-mother that makes it impossible for her to rise to a broader, universal view of the situation – all this embodiment and affect and particularity and situatedness getting in the way of the imperative connection between true knowledge and effective action.

She is us: well-meaning, partially informed, but unable to go to the lengths demanded by the true gravity of the situation. So constrained and misdirected by the mediating conditions of our location and experience that we can't really act in a way that is consistent with, or demanded by, what we know to be true. How many of you are doing what you know you must in response to the truth of global warming? And if you are not, why not? Could it be because the particularities of your situation and the habits of your embodied practices and the culture and economy and politics in which you are situated get in the way of your doing so?

The only hope under the imperative we face is to eliminate the mediating factors that prevent effective action.

And this is why, at the crucial moment, *the man steps in*. The man who – as far as we can tell – not only knows the truth but is so dislocated (coming from and going we know not where – **“somewhere no one can find him”** – the island of the blessed, perhaps), so unencumbered, disembodied, devoid of affect, purely rational, heartless, universal, and machine-like that he can act on this knowledge without restraint. He is the philosopher-king: unmediated knowledge and action combined in a single agent. When it becomes clear that the woman is not prepared to go the distance, to make perfect the connection between what she knows and what must be done, he declares his intention to rule. He will do what must be done to keep faith with the truth and save the world. He will cut the child's throat.

(It is also not incidental that the tension here turns on the child. The child – the figure of reproductive sexuality, the imperative of reproduction, the figure of heteronormative futurity – is for the mother the motivation to act to save the future. For the vaguely queer, Platonic, stranger the child and the sentimentality attached to it is the cause of the problem and the barrier to just action. Recall that in Plato's *Republic*, supernumerary children were consigned to the woods to die. Needless to say, this complicates things considerably).

That's a lot. It is only one interpretation of one version of our situation. And that is kind of the point. The series from which that clip was taken is aptly named *Utopia* – no place. Plato's ideal city run by philosopher-kings was also a utopia, also no-place. Why are they no place?

The bus station and the *Republic* are *no place* because there is actually no place that escapes the truth of mediation. Plato knew this, which is why he had to resort to fantasy to make his point. There is no world in which actual beings live in which there is or can be an unmediated relationship between the truth and action – even a tyranny of philosophy or science requires its own characteristic forms and techniques of mediation (in Plato's case: a Noble Lie, ruthless cops and civil religion).

What is the point of this argument? It is not as though the prospect of scientifically-informed tyrants running around imposing radical reductions in fossil-fuel production and consumption, draconian cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, compulsory transition to renewable energy sources and sustainable energy relations is really our current problem. The reason groups like Extinction Rebellion have to engage in civil disobedience in order to persuade political elites to “tell the truth” and “act now” is because these elites are otherwise nowhere near doing so. Also, my reading of the scene at the bus station is not really intended to lend credence to conservative

apologists who cynically invoke the spectre of “eco-fascism” as a means of stigmatizing environmentalists and avoiding responsive and responsible environmental action.

So what is the point, then? Pleas such as those of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion – “I want you to panic...unite behind the science...start acting” and “tell the truth...act now...beyond politics” – are compelling because of their simplicity and, hopefully, they will have the effect of motivating citizens and leaders to act in decisive, effective and responsible ways in relation to the environmental crisis we face. They are also admirably saboteurial, insofar as they take discursive tactics typically used to support entrenched interests and to justify intensification of the status quo – i.e., simplification and imperative, something like a moral panic – and turn them against those interests and the present order. As I have said: the activist in me hopes they succeed, and I will do what I can to help.

But the humanities scholar in me must do what humanities scholars do, and attend to the moral, political and social complexity in what otherwise appears to be straightforward, in order to keep faith with the beauty and elusiveness of the world. The fact of mediation has always been central to how scholars of communication understand human experience in the world. In most cases, this has entailed rejection of the utopian proposition of unmediated communication between knowledge and action. However, in many cases, scholars and theorists of communication have accepted and repeated the premise that mediation, while necessary, nevertheless exerts a pathological influence on the efficient translation of knowledge into effective action. In these cases, mediation, in its various material, symbolic, linguistic, relational and practical forms, is cast as an unwanted source of distortion, noise, error, corruption and signal loss – in a word, as the source of miscommunication. Within this frame, the task is to develop techniques that minimize, manage, cancel, silence, circumvent or otherwise overcome the problem of mediation, such that we can proceed directly from what we know to what must be done.

In times like ours, in which there is a looming, incontestable truth that demands decisive and *immediate* action, and in which mediation by all sorts of cultural, political, material, embodied interests, experiences and relationships distorts communication of that imperative, it is especially tempting to adopt this position – to say, with the philosopher/scientist-king in the bus station: “Hey lady: I know what needs to be done and I know you will never do it; get out of the way, let a man take over.”

But there is another way to approach the fact of mediation, the fact that there is no possibility of direct communication between knowledge and action, the fact that mediation is always necessary. This is to affirm that mediation is not pathological, but normal – it is the normal condition of human and other beings being in the world together. There is no escape from culture, politics, bodies and feelings, and this is a good thing.

Recent thinking in communication studies has troubled the pretense implied by its own name (i.e., that something like a perfect, immediate translation of signal is possible) and works from the premise that miscommunication is what we have, and that mediation is not pathological but instead, as John Durham Peters has characterized it, “a handsome condition” – the condition that makes the world a world and constitutes our humanity in it, a humanity that is at least partly

defined by our relationship to non-human things. In this sense, mediation is not a separate, secondary moment in relation to the communication between knowledge and action – it is the primary (and only) scene where knowledge and action are made and joined. (This is already the implication of Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence).

The point of this is not to disparage the work of excellent activists who call for immediate action consistent with the truth of global warming and its causes, or to gainsay their political strategies. As a citizen, I celebrate them and will do what I can to follow their leadership – because, after all, these strategies also belong to the complex, incomplete, imperfect nature of being political in the world. Just as we cannot escape mediation, nor can we avoid the work of making judgments. We can and must make distinctions: when Greta Thunberg says, “I want you to panic,” she is not speaking cynically, as an incumbent elite trying to manipulate others into serving her private interests by invoking an imaginary crisis, she is speaking as a frightened child begging others to care, urgently, about a real threat facing everyone in common.

My point is that, *as a humanities scholar*, and especially as one who works in the field of communication studies, working in the time of catastrophic environmental collapse, I might want to say something in addition to “Sign me up!” I might linger for a while over the troubling possibility that what I am signing up for, at least in its strategic expression, could in some ways align more with the creepy stranger in the bus station (whose method simplifies the world for him and relieves him of the burden of making judgments) than with the woman who is doing the very best she can to make difficult judgments under complex conditions.

I might recall that, historically at least, when we have been visited by men armed with the “correct perception of reality,” who incite panic and demand that we “embrace that fact and support *whatever* effort it takes,” it has typically not gone very well for people at the bottom of various social, political and economic hierarchies. Radical environmentalists are not fascists, but fascists will not hesitate to deploy radical environmentalism when it suits them. And so I also wonder about how soon it will be before the Trumps of the world turn away from denying science and towards wielding it (and by this I do not mean fake science but real science, the same science to which we appeal) as authoritative justification for their plans. It is well-known that the US military is at an advanced stage of using the best science to plan for climate catastrophe, and that billionaire elites are consulting the best science to select the optimal geographic locations for their private sanctuaries and developing the technologies to defend them.

When they arrive with their orders and say: “You asked us to follow the science and to act, and that is just what we are doing,” we might need a better answer than, “That’s not what we meant!” We might want to remember that the organizing question of the humanities, flawed as they have been and are, is not just whether the human species can survive on this planet but, moreover, whether it can do so with some version of its humanity intact, and what that humanity might mean under such conditions. These too, are the stakes of catastrophic global warming and its associated calamities, and it is what I take Scranton to mean when he says, “The fate of the humanities, as we confront the end of modern civilization, is the fate of humanity itself.”

For my part, I am inclined to think that humanity is constituted by the experience and character of mediation, and by how various forms of mediation establish, condition or foreclose material relationships between diverse humans, and between these humans and the many non-human others with whom we share the planet. This is “the handsome condition” of mediation, the wonder of communication as something other (and better) than the impossible dream of immediate, perfect transmission. It is a condition that troubles the possibility of an uncomplicated relationship between the truth and action, but the fate of the humanities is to attend to such troubles, come what may. To do so, it must be a humanities shorn of anthropocentrism and the other (masculinist, racialized) chauvinisms that have for too long defined it – but, for us, this task should be straightforward, and it will be nothing compared to the complicated problem of climate change.