

# Notes on media, culture and resilience

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Inspired by the contemporary “ecomedia” discourse, I will propose a few conceptual reflections on cultural sustainability and media resilience. (1) First, I heuristically suggest three different ways in which to relate media to societal problems such as the climate crisis. (2) Then follows a brief outline of a hermeneutic concept of culture as meaning-making practice. (3) Next, this concept is linked to that of sustainability, developing the idea of cultural sustainability. (4) This points toward a need to formulate the requirements of a cultural citizenship that is based on communicative rights. (5) In the following step, the idea of cultural resilience is added and discussed in relation to conflicts of interpretation and agonistic politics. (6) It is finally asked if it may be possible to identify a tipping point on the threshold to runaway change in human culture, as well as in the ecosystem, undermining our capacities to make the world meaningful?<sup>1</sup>

## Media and societal problems

One may heuristically identify three possible ways of relating media to contemporary societal problems such as those raised by imminent ecological catastrophes. One may focus on the dangers for mediated communication and public spheres caused by globalisation, commodification or populist nationalism. This perspective starts with new difficulties for various media to fulfil their key missions in the contemporary situation. Here, the media are mainly seen as *victims* of historical and social trends, having problems in contemporary societies.

But media are also *villains*: key sources causing serious political and social problems. Mediatisation increases the societal impact of various kinds of media with authoritarian applications that threaten processes of socialisation and democratic governance.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Kirsten Drotner and Göran Bolin for allowing me to develop these thoughts at two workshops of Academia Europaea’s Film, Media and Visual Studies Section, devoted to media culture and sustainability – one in Budapest, Hungary 3/9 2017, the other in Wrocław, Poland 12/12 2018.

It is thirdly also possible to explore ways in which media provide resources for identifying problems and solving them. Media serve as indicators and forums for finding solutions to today's crises. They show where cultural conflicts and climate catastrophes emerge, and it is only our communicative capacities for mediated and mediating meaning-making that may find tenable ways to solve current problems.

All these ways of relating media to societal crises are legitimate, but I sense a need to balance the two first, more negative ones with the third, creative one, which is at once both critical and utopian. Media should not just be seen as innocent victims having problems in modern society; nor as enemy villains causing problems for society; but also and not least as seismographs suggesting *solutions*, as providers of necessary remedies – provided they can function as they should.

### Culture as meaning and mediation

I will here focus on *cultural* aspects of media resilience. There are many definitions of culture, including the ontological one of human cultivation, the anthropological concept of culture as lifeforms and the aesthetic one comprising the arts. I find the more recent hermeneutic concept of culture as meaning-making through signifying practice to be the most useful one, for reasons I will not further elaborate here (see instead Fornäs, 2017).

Making meaning is not primarily about producing texts but first of all about making meaningful such networks of things that we understand as texts, through acts of interpretation. The author of a text provides the material structure which text users through acts of interpretation can associate with meanings. But the meanings of a text are not primarily produced by its author but by its reader or user, even though the author as imagined by the reader plays an important role in the interpretation process: understanding a text is affected by how the reader imagines its author, which in turn of course is partially determined by who the real author was. As Paul Ricoeur (1969/1974 and 1976) has pointed out, meanings emerge not behind the text, in the author's intentions, but in front of the text, in the contextualised encounter between text and subject. Meaning is made in signifying acts that intrinsically combine imagination with communication. On one hand, the ("vertical") imaginary leap between the present material textual thing to its associated but absent web of meanings; on the other hand, the equally necessary ("horizontal") communication between different subjects, texts and contexts which even the most private reading experience actually is.

Late modern citizens “live in *cultures of technology*, or technological culture”, and “culture *is* technology: a *cultural technology*” (Bolin, 2012, pp. 2 and 5). Meaning-making relies on a network of media technologies and genres, since media are the dedicated technologies of culture, as Ulf Hannerz (1992) once said. If culture is meaning-making practice, combining imagination with communication, then media are the cultural techniques specifically developed and used for such purpose.

In this perspective, cultural sustainability would be the effort to secure the long-term capacity for meaning-making: people’s ability to interpret and understand their world. Not only the ecology (or the natural environment) needs some kind of care in order to reproduce its preconditions for human culture – a culture taking responsibility for “natureculture”, to use Donna Haraway’s (1991 and 2008) term (see also Fornäs, 2017, Ch. 7). Today, in the era of the Anthropocene, human practices of understanding and interpretation also need a politics of sustainability: a cultivation of culture, so to speak.

### Cultural sustainability

I can think of two main ways of conceptualising sustainability.

In a wider and more general – but also in a sense more “local” – perspective, sustainability points at the need for all separate systems to have balancing mechanisms to secure their smooth reproduction. From some kind of system theory perspective, one may scrutinize the stability of any system, be it psychological, political or aesthetic, for instance. As media scholars, we would then be particularly anxious that the media sphere is itself sustainable, so that it does not collapse from its own inner contradictions.

However, all different forms of such “local” sustainabilities are mutually intertwined and superimposed, and therefore cannot really be discussed in separation, in particular since one of them is today the most central, dominant and vulnerable one. This calls for an intersectional approach that conceptually and analytically distinguishes between different sustainability issues but at the same time also acknowledges their close interdependence and interaction. Even though sustainability may well be an issue in all spheres, it has as far as I am aware entered the agenda for one specific reason, namely, the core intersection between the economic and the ecological systems.

The separation of culture from nature is an historical construction which is never complete. As Donna Haraway and others have suggested, “natureculture” is no fixed dichotomy but rather a dynamic continuum. Culture – the human capability to make meanings – originated in nature through a

kind of “agential cut” (Karen Barad), creating a tension within natureculture between materiality and meaning, not as stiff and polar opposites, but engaged in an ongoing dialectic process of becoming. As much as their separation is situated and relative, reproduced through a practice of social construction, it has real effects. Some of its effects are “positive” in terms of human societies’ capacity for knowledge growth and development. But there are also immense risks and costs involved.

The concept of *sustainability* derives from the Latin “sub” and “tenere”, literally meaning to hold something up from below: to strengthen or support something, so as to keep it going continuously. The Brundtland Commission of the United Nations in 1987 made sustainable development a prominent political slogan. It is usually specified as resting on three pillars, in practice interdependent but analytically separable: social sustainability securing human rights, ecologic sustainability securing the reproduction of environmental and material resources, and economic sustainability to abolish world poverty. Other pillars have been proposed for supplementation, for instance demographic, political and financial sustainability. More relevant to our discussion here today is the UN Agenda 21 addition in 2002 of cultural sustainability as a fourth pillar.

Instead of accumulating an interminable series of sustainabilities, I prefer to stick to focusing on the ecology–economy relation. Human societies are integrated in the ecosystem, which must be able to reproduce in order for societies to survive. Sustainability is an issue since the economic system of capitalism, which is a semi-auto-matised outgrowth of the social sphere, based solely on profitable valorisation, has an inherent tendency to expand across all boundaries, which – as Karl Marx well knew – risks undermining both the social and the natural basis of human existence. These two forms of reproduction must be balanced, so that economic processes do not destroy the natural environment on which they thrive, just like exchange values feed on use values (Fornäs, 2013). This task may be almost impossible, due to capitalism’s self-destructive, explosive–implosive character.

Human societies are integrated in the ecosystem, which must be able to reproduce itself in order for societies to survive. Sustainability can be discussed in lots of contexts, but it has become an urgent issue since the economic system of market-, value-, wage labour- and profit-based capitalism has an inherent tendency to expand across every material boundary, thereby undermining both the social and the natural basis of human existence. The reproduction of the market economy is based on spirals of boundless expansion of commodities and profits, which sooner or later collide with the

material limits of global resources. The general tension between nature and culture reaches an acute stage with the unbound market forces in the capitalist mode of production, whose mechanism of quantitative expansion has given rise to a fatal spiral of self-destructive hubris.

The reproduction of human society must strike a balance with that of the ecosystem, but so far, capitalism seems to lack sufficient barriers to prevent economic processes from destroying the natural environment on which they thrive. Ecological and economic sustainability are closely intertwined. It is primarily the latter that produces the first, but once the ecological balance transgresses a set of tipping points, societies and their economies will certainly in turn be affected and even annihilated. Technological fixes can temporarily halt the erosion of the ecosystem, but in a longer term, human societies must develop another social and economic foundation that no longer requires continual excessive growth far beyond the affordances of this planet Earth.

A growing body of “ecomedia studies” (Walker & Starosielski, 2016) concentrates either on “media in the environment”: the ecological impact of the media, in particular through digital waste; or on “media about the environment”: how media cover ecological topics. Both of these issues – of materialities and of representations – are relevant, and together they express the cultural concerns of ecomedia studies. The disastrous climate crisis has crucial cultural causes, including the irresponsible fiction of endless expansion of mankind in a limited zone of the universe. On the other hand, there must also be cultural remedies to this crisis, if science, politics and the media can establish key facts, take responsibility and initiate effective measures to secure an inhabitable future for younger generations. From “cli-fi” to online environmental activism, media practices and discourses do really contribute crucial resources for achieving sustainability.

Balancing economic and ecological processes demands social and political reflection and responsible action, which in turn requires well-functioning communication processes. The reproduction crisis is caused by malfunctions in the social sphere and can only be remedied by social measures, with media and communications as central tools. Neither biological nor economic mechanisms alone can escape the impasse which modern societies have locked themselves into. Commodified communication media contribute to the destructive forces of capitalist modernity, but are also necessary contributors to finding a way out of this deadlock. We need to improve our ability to interpret the current situation, to discover and map its problems, and to imagine sustainable alternatives. All of these are cultural capacities, anchored

in the social world and relying on the specific meaning-making tools of communication media. Well-functioning media processes are necessary components for securing sustainability.

The cultural techniques that are used and commonly identified as communication media may thus in two main ways be discussed in relation to issues of sustainability: one “local” and one “global”. On one hand, their own specific reproduction and functioning need to be secured. On the other hand, their role in either underpinning or undermining ecological sustainability needs further investigation and consideration. Around the central mechanism where economic forces globally challenge the ecosystem, there is a network cluster of intertwined “local” sustainability mechanisms, including those of the media system.

### Cultural citizenship and communicative rights

Science and technology can explain how ecological systems function and develop tools for repairing them. But in order to identify and understand what is the problem and what should be done, there must be interpretive social sciences and humanities. For instance, cultural research is needed to understand that strange new form of fact resistance which threatens to make sciences unable to achieve anything at all in the social and political world.

A sustainable culture demands working systems and processes of mediation. This has been codified in the wide concept of *media literacy*, securing material, social and personal infrastructures for communication, including public spheres, information exchange and education. This requires sustainable reproduction of capacities for culture, critique and creativity: understanding ecological and economic systems; identifying problems of their linkage; and suggesting changes by means of utopian imagination. Cultural processes of imaginative meaning making form our views of the world and of ourselves. Facts, fears and fantasies of reconciliation in a better world develop from mediated cultural practices which only humanities and social sciences can decipher.

Communicative practices and tools, integrated into interlinked public spheres, are a necessity. But it is also essential that civil society has room for social movements as well as cultural movements, which in arts, popular culture and subcultures expand society’s interpretive capacities and thus enable us to identify and counteract sustainability deficits.

Mediating processes are thus essential tools for securing sustainability in this more specific sense, but at the same time, they demand a sustainability of

the media themselves. From Raymond Williams' *Communications* (1962/1973: pp. 120–123 and 138) to work by for instance Graham Murdock (1996), efforts have been made to specify how modern citizenship relies on practices of communication, interpretation and mediation. According to Williams (1962/1973, pp. 120–123 and 138), a democratic system of communication should be grounded on basic rights to transmit and receive that together form the basis for free speech, participation and discussion. These rights must be guaranteed by public-service institutions not directly controlled by governments, so that “the active contributors have control of their own means of expression”. Williams proposed that public responsibility in the area of education included teaching speech, writing, creative expression, contemporary arts, institutions and criticism. The reforms he proposed in the area of institutions aimed to “make sure that as many people as possible are free to reply and criticize”, which demanded “the right to reply, the right to criticize and compare, and the right to distribute alternatives”. I find these ideas still remarkably relevant to the current discourse of media literacy, though there is certainly need for updating due to processes of mediatisation. One of the most recent and elaborated efforts in this direction is that proposed by the International Panel on Social Progress IPSP (Couldry et al., 2018).

Hence, cultural citizenship needs to be based on communicative rights of information, experience, knowledge and participation in collective processes of meaning-making, demanding material, social and personal resources for using the widest possible range of media in dialogue with others, securing the reproduction of texts, contexts and subjects as the three basic elements of communication and culture. This includes access to both software texts and hardware technologies: to multiple languages and symbolic modes, to an open stock of texts and genres, and to intersectional discourses and public spheres. Not everyone has sufficient means to access such resources in commodity form through the market, and there is therefore a need for supplementary provision through interpersonal gifts and public utilities as well. This requires a combination of media markets with civic networks as well as democratically organised libraries and other public services (Fornäs et al., 2007, pp. 188–193; see also Fornäs, 2008).

This is also linked to political issues of censorship and rights of free expression as well as to economic issues of how the media market pools resources for consumers. Citizens further need personal resources to be able to make full use of the available media texts and machines in accessible social and spatial settings for such media use. Williams belonged to a European tradition discussing this in terms of enlightenment, popular education and

literacy. From alphabetization and mass education to public service and media literacy, this empowering project has had tremendous effects. It has empowered the working classes and other subordinate groups, but it has also had a problematic paternalistic tendency to evaluate these personal skills according to a biased normative scale, derived from the standards and norms of bourgeois high culture. Populist and neoliberal relativists have on the contrary argued against all state intervention and falsely trusted the commercial market to be able to offer a satisfactory supply to every existing demand. The issue of media literacy should not fall back to such an individualist position. Personal capacities must be related to the specific demands raised by the communicative situation of each individual, each moment and each place. Media literacy cannot be a straightforward question of trained experts teaching young people how to listen to music or use the Internet. In many media areas, there is still no effective schooling system, and there will never be one that covers all new genres and modes of communication. Instead, the task must be to create conditions for everyone to develop media literacies through participation in a diverse set of educational settings, subcultures and interpretive communities. For this, people need access to reliable information on how to find and use different media, but also access to opportunities for developing critical reflection on the existing media world. This can never be fully “delivered” by state institutions, but the communicative rights of cultural citizenship must strive to deconstruct the obstacles that commercial businesses, authoritarian states or oppressive social groups raise for such critical engagement.

### Conflicts, dynamics and resilience

The affordances of different media can on one hand contribute to sustainability by identifying problems in the interlinked natureculture system and exploring ways of solving them. However, media can also threaten sustainability, by themselves producing material waste and pollution, but also by being used for pathological forms of communication, breeding what has been discussed as “fake news” and “fact resistance”.

No society can be permanently sustainable, since those sociocultural resources built for securing key balances can always in new ways be corrupted and instead contribute to the evils they were intended to prevent. The notion of sustainability alone may be too harmonious and too static. After all, balancing is normally a task and a dynamic *act*, not a given or fixed *fact*. The fate of the current climate crisis is decided on the cultural arena where conflicts

of interpretation (to borrow Ricoeur's expression) take place, discussing how to understand the material facts provided by the natural sciences. Chantal Mouffe (2013) has argued that there cannot be expected to emerge a consensus between political interests, but in order to avoid the mutual destruction resulting from *antagonistic* struggles to defeat and annihilate the adversary, democracy must rely on certain procedural forms to deal with conflicts, thus developing what Mouffe calls an *agonistic* politics. There will never be a social world in static and harmonious equilibrium, without imbalances. Neither sustainability nor consensus will therefore ever be permanently secured. But it may suffice to develop a processual dynamism for dealing with upcoming disturbances through democratic procedures of debate, negotiation and collective action.

This would correspond to the notion of *resilience*. If sustainability is about the balanced reproducibility of natureculture, resilience concerns the capacity of ecosystems and societies to absorb disturbance and reproduce in a sustainable way in spite of temporary imbalances. The Latin term "resilir" means to recoil or to be able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions such as bending, stretching or compression. Resilience thus implies a capacity to retain or reinstall sustainability whenever it is under threat.

### Approaching a cultural tipping point

Here again, the field of culture and media is a crucial hub. It is important to discuss media's negative as well as positive role for ecological sustainability, but also for cultural sustainability. Media need to be resilient in order to secure those communicative rights and resources that can sustain cultural citizenship in these fateful times. Media contribute to environmental problems as well as to our efforts to solve them. As dedicated technologies of culture, they provide resources for meaning-making practices, which are today under serious stress.

The current growth of right-wing nationalism has sent shock waves through democratic societies, by obstructing mediated opinion formation and thus undermining the basis of enlightened democracy. This has been seen in countries like Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Russia, Turkey, Syria, the Philippines, Brazil and the United States. However, similar tendencies can be traced almost everywhere. In Sweden, there is likewise a frightening growth of forces pushing towards a new kind of fascist barbarism, including attacks on a wide spectrum of knowledge production, from science to journalism.

Researchers today fear a possible “runaway climate change”, where accumulated changes reach a “tipping point” at which the balancing mechanisms and subsequent efforts to heal the planet can no more prevent the catastrophe that may make the Earth uninhabitable for humans. Is there also a runaway cultural change approaching a cultural tipping point when the communicative resources of the total media network can no more underpin the shared meaning-making essential for agonistic democracy and sustainable civilization, so that what remains is pure, antagonistic violence? How much communication crisis can democracy survive? How can current media practices contain and neutralise rather than feed and strengthen totalitarian nationalism, racist xenophobia, antifeminist misogyny and fact-resistant climate change denial?

*Media are in trouble*, as authoritarian extremists attack journalists, threaten to dismount public spheres and install measures of political and religious censorship and regulation of mass media as well as social media. Today’s authoritarianism and knowledge resistance gain momentum by first of all disarming public media institutions and critical practices, preventing them from working as they should and must work as a communicative backbone in civil society. Media require the protection and strengthening of a set of communicative rights of cultural citizenship. Media can only function in democratic, emancipatory and empowering ways if there is access to such infrastructural resources.

On the other hand, much of today’s fascist wars against democracy take place on the cultural arena, as a symbolic struggle that is fuelled by dysfunctional media that deliver weapons to a culture war against equality, against critical reflexivity, and against globalisation. *Media cause trouble*, not just by making direct material contributions to the ecological disaster in the form of electronic waste, but also by indirectly undermining sensible dynamics for reconciling human societies with the biosphere. There is a need for further research and discussion of how digital devices pollute biospheres and exploit natural resources. But there are also more specific cultural threats as some media technologies may help breaking down communicative processes by letting lies, fear and hate run rampant. When the cultural techniques of the media are too firmly chained to market mechanisms of commodification, they tend to hollow out communication processes and empty them of meaningful contents, practices of critical debate and shared understanding. This may undermine agonistic politics in Mouffe’s sense. The only platform left is then that of violent terror and oppression. A possible tipping point in both these two first respects is when media cease to function as meaning-makers

so that trust is eroded by manipulative strategies undermining efforts of understanding. What can here be learned from historical examples? How many steps are there to a de facto fascist dictatorship in Brazil, Hungary or the United States, for instance?

This is why there is an urgent demand for exploring how *media contribute solutions*. After all, mediated communication is necessary to understand the situation and make societies less catastrophic. How can we use media to reinforce resilience? Media research and public communication are necessary devices for sustainable development, but how should they be secured for the future? How can contemporary modes of communicative meaning-making safeguard a sustainable media sphere which is able to assist in providing measures to prevent economic forces to completely destroy the global ecosystem? It is in both these respects through communicative action that solutions must be motivated and explored. A first task is to use all communicative skills and resources to identify potential “runaway changes” in the cultural climate of late modern societies, resulting when a “tipping point” in the media system has eroded critical feedback mechanisms and allowed fascist non-understanding to stand unquestioned.

In shifting ways, several countries today seem to be dangerously close to these tipping points – both of the ecological environment and of that communicative public sphere for meaning-making that constitutes human culture and civilization. Media studies can learn from sustainability theory but also contribute to the understanding of the cultural dimensions of sustainability: our capacities for making the world – and our ecological concerns – meaningful.

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