

## Preface

### 1. The Heart of the Matter

In what follows, I make a theoretical exploration into the *mass communication of ecological issues*, a phenomenon bound to become increasingly important through the ongoing dual process of economic-cum-ecological globalization and information revolution. Such an exploration is warranted, first, because, despite the highly visible co-existence of global warming and the digital divide on the same world-stage, socio-humanistic research generally has continued to focus on ecology and (mass) communication in their mutual separation. Since interconnections of ecology and communication have received attention from only a limited number of media analysts and environmentally sensitive journalists, mass communication of ecological issues is as yet an under-examined theme.

Secondly, the scarce research on the topic—though it has occasionally been done and shared under the generalized rubric of *environmental or ecological communication* (EC)—actually amounts to little more than disparate case studies and empirical reports related to risk and hazard communication, disaster communication, environmental journalism, or science journalism. In other words, mainstream research on communication of ecological matters falls short of a theoretical exploration into the probable interfaces between ecology and communication, pointing to the research community's overall complacency with uncoordinated and narrowly-framed case studies. Furthermore, the majority of existing EC accounts represent a positivistic, solution-provider's ideology, even though they are invested in the progressive cause of environmentalism: They generally accept the media as a probative solution to ecologically suspect acts of the State or corporate sector, and are not particularly invested in the speculative realm of possible silences that may characterize the communicative landscapes of global ecologies. As such, what we have in the academic labeling of EC does not quite enable us to undertake a critical theorizing of the processes and enterprises that constitute ecological communication.

In view of the above, I bring to the surface the tacit assumptions of the discourse of EC, including its participants' dominant epistemological orientations and professional biases. And, as part of their critique, I examine some earlier attempts that have linked

“ecology” with “communication” in ways that have been ignored by existing participants of the discourse of EC. Here, my project takes on a historical character by chasing and speculating about the relevance of the attempts made in systems theory, especially as exemplified in the works of Gregory Bateson and Niklas Luhmann. Discussing Bateson and Luhmann—neither of whom analyzed media coverage of ecological issues even as they linked ecology with communication—allows me to critique contemporary EC’s self-styled role as primarily a media discourse and its reluctance to account for the pro-active roles of a variety of other institutions and entities in ecological communication.

In going beyond EC’s media focus, I contend that the issues neglected by EC researchers have already been delved into independently—even though to unrelated ends—by thinkers from other more mature discourses. Those discourses prominently include: development studies; philosophy and sociology of technology; political theory; and cultural and literary theory. Inspired by the above discourses, especially by the contributions of Ashis Nandy, I develop upon the following analytical and theoretical axes for a critical theorization of EC: (1) technology; (2) the nation-state; and (3) the discourse of development. I devote exclusive sections to two of the above components: against the general background of *development*.

The chief research questions I address are:

## **2. Throbbing Curiosities**

- What is ecological communication? How do we decide what counts as ecological communication and what does not? How do we define the scope of EC as a discourse?
- What is the relationship between technology and ecological communication? Do particular technologies elicit particular communicative or media responses? Contrarily, do technologies *of* communication affect communication of ecological issues? How? Do we need to classify technologies according to the dynamics of ecological communication? How do we go about making such a classification?
- What is the relationship between development and ecological communication? What sort of a relationship might there be between development journalism and environmental journalism? How do development technologies relate to ecological communication?

- What is the relationship between nation-states and ecological communication? What political and cultural issues might contribute to this dynamic?
- What might EC have to offer to our future? What does the future hold out for EC? On the theoretical front, where might the discourse of EC be headed? Where should it head, beyond my research findings?

I will explore the above curiosities in the following seven chapters.

### **3. Outline of the Analysis**

Given the unavailability of a basic introduction to EC, I outline in Chapter I the ways in which the term environmental (or ecological) communication has been understood and used roughly through the 1990s and the early 2000s. Since a variety of independent, and sometimes unrelated, constituencies have been invested in using and adapting the term according to their own interests, I have chosen not to impose a normative definition of my own. Instead, I have proposed to approach EC on two broad levels (that, I believe, have the capacity to respond to the definitional panorama): (1) as a conceptual phenomenon; and, (2) as a field of interest. While I provide my own definition of EC as a conceptual phenomenon, it is primarily as *a field of interest* that EC has claimed most of my attention in the dissertation. Hence, in considering the future alternatives to the dominant framing of EC, I also discuss in this chapter an otherwise neglected European report that makes philosophical linkages between EC and sustainable development in the backdrop of European unification and globalization.

In Chapter II, I provide a brief intellectual history of a range of closely-related techno-scientific and intellectual movements that emerged and developed through the late 1940s to the 1970s, some of whose strands highlighted linkages between *ecology* and *communication*. Significantly, these movements, including cybernetics, information theory, evolutionary vision, and systems theory, linked *ecology* and *communication* in ways that are alien to the contemporary media-centered view of ecological communication popular on the platform of EC. Most importantly, discussing these movements is a requisite prelude to grasping the relevant contributions of Bateson and Luhmann.

Following from the above discussion, Chapter III introduces those musings of Bateson that linked *ecology* and *communication*, or that affected Luhmann's formulations of EC. Specifically in the first instance, I have considered it pertinent to discuss Bateson because of the absence of any explicit activist, journalistic, or policy orientation from his EC-related undertakings; he is relevant in the second instance because of his imprint on Luhmann's conceptualization of binary coding and function-system differentiation within the latter's theory of EC. Bateson is also important to consider because his idea of ecological communication goes far beyond human communication, and thus provides an interesting contrast to the dominant discourse of EC that has focused entirely on the public domain of human communication about environmental issues.

In Chapter IV, I provide a detailed exegesis of Luhmann's book *Ecological Communication* (1986) partly because it provides a *theoretical* alternative to the practically oriented field of EC. As such, I contextualize *Ecological Communication* both within the previously discussed movements and Luhmann's other works. Simultaneously, I also discuss the specific relevance of Luhmann's contribution to EC, especially of his conceptualization of ecological communication in terms of communicative dynamics among social systems generally rather than that of a binding reference to the mass media. I also highlight here the unique significance of Bateson's universalistic, pan-biospheric view of ecological communication that he also attempted to extend to a spirituality. However, in the end, I reject the frameworks of both the above authors for the future theorization of EC on account of their outlandish idealism, and, in the case of Luhmann, also because of his mechanistic positivistic outlook and rejection of ontology.

With the objective of exploring realistic alternatives to the media-centered praxis of EC on one hand, and to mutually divergent impractical formulations of Bateson and Luhmann, on the other, I focus on formulating the relationship between technological forms and ecological communication in Chapter V. I have pursued this theme also because until now science, rather than technology, has dominated both the platform and praxis of EC. Furthermore, the positivistic image of the role and capabilities of the media within EC has generally eclipsed the specific ontological character of technological forms and their contextual effects on eco-communicative patterns. I have considered it

imperative to focus on technology also because it is an important force within the discourses of both international development and modernization, and, as such, holds a unique political significance for the theory of ecological communication. In this context, I have been benefited from the critiques of development and technology offered by critical traditionalists such as Ashis Nandy.

*Development* and *technology* provide alternative, heretofore neglected, themes to the discourse of EC, and critically analyzing them has allowed me to go beyond the activist, positivistic zeal of EC's research community. These two themes, however, are inextricably linked, especially in the wake of the 1990s globalization, to the power and role of the nation-state—another neglected theme within EC. Since nation-states are typically associated with political communication, examining them from the viewpoint of ecological communication provides novel perspectives on them, on the discourse of EC, and on the capabilities attributed to, and hopes attached to, the media in relation to ecological communication. As such, I make a case-study, in Chapter VI, of the Indian nuclear event of May 1998, and view the technological exercise as a *de facto* erasure of ecological communication at the hands of the Indian nation-state. In light of that, I also argue that EC cannot be looked at merely in terms of what is said or should be said about the environment (as a matter of articulate presence), but also in terms of what has been silenced or repressed by way of other louder communications (in this case, the nuclear tests).

In Chapter VII, I conclude the dissertation by pointing up the critiques of EC developed in the previous chapters and locating EC functionally and politically. As such, I argue that at present EC is at best a *platform* (for a wide range of rather uncoordinated projects relating to the composite concerns of ecology and communication), and that if it wishes to graduate to a theoretically informed discourse, it must develop critical self-reflexivity. I further argue that EC could make early headways toward a critical self-reflexivity by focusing on extra-media institutions and forces (such as *development*, *technology*, and *nation-state*). This is because such foci would allow EC to re-locate the mass media, which has been its point of activist departure, more intelligently within the broader global dynamics of ecological communication. I also suggest that academic

contributors to the platform of EC examine their own social statuses in global terms, and then consider the global role of EC both as a platform and as an academic discourse.

This study engages in qualitative research, which, in turn, employs textual, discourse, and media analyses as its primary methodologies. Since the project is a socio-humanistic survey of issues that fall into technological and scientific domains, I also take into consideration pertinent empirical reports and research findings. On the broadest level, I have benefited from the discourses of critical traditionalism and semiotics in conducting this analysis.