If "we" had been able to more fully invest in that Indymedia network and model of operations, and address the growing pains and problems that limited its ability to address challenges while it still retained the vitali ty of its peak, we'd now most likely be in a much better activist media ecology currently.

We need to appreciate the innovative abilities we have to create, and also the need to recognize what we will benefit from investing in.

This piece of writing is a gathering together of different ideas at different stages of articulation and formation. While it may have some qualities of a manifesto, it is much more of a starting point than anything authoritative.

Feedback is very welcome and invited – perhaps there are examples of media platforms that are aligned? Or how challenges related to these issues, were successfully shifted at a personal level? Or … or … or….

Find points of contact with the author, at **EquitableEducation.ca**

AUTHOR BIO:

Greg Macdougall is based in Ottawa, and has been involved in activist media making and organizing for two decades, beginning with the UWaterloo student newspaper and the Independent Media Centers of Ontario and of Kitchener-Waterloo. Published at rabble.ca, Ricochet, Briarpatch, National Observer, Anishinabek News, Counterpunch, The Dominion, and elsewhere,also with videos, audio, and PDFs at EquitableEducation.ca. Involved in grassroots activist organizing and education, primarily with Common Cause anarchists, IPSMO Indigenous solidarity, Organizing For Justice gatherings, and fight to protect Asinabka / Akikodjiwan. Disabled mental health status, in part from influences of dominant society in general and some experiences in particular.

WHAT MEDIA COULD DO TO HELP WITH CLIMATE ACTION
and
WHAT IT IS DOING TO INTERFERE

by Greg Macdougall, EquitableEducation.ca

February 2020
'Draft 1' book chapter submission

The overall message here, is a few-fold:

* That we must look at the importance of media as a vital part of facilitating whatever effective response to climate crisis we can come up with.

* That we must understand how most of the communications platforms we currently use, are part of what re-enforces the problems we want to solve.

* That figuring out what media we need, and what it can accomplish, needs to be followed by adequately investing in and supporting its successful creation and operation.

The premise of this rant-manifesto, is that the major media platforms and systems we have, are not what we need to effectively address the climate crisis. They are a very large problem that obstructs our ability to do so.

This includes what's known as social media, as well as the paradigms that major traditional corporate media (TV, radio, newspapers) and most 'new media' (online outlets) operate from.

The other major premise or (maybe a more accurate phrasing) context, is that the focus needs to be on the three pillars of mitigation, adaptation, and resilience, as well as equitable re-distribution of resources in order that under-resourced countries and groups are able to adequately do those three things for themselves. Also to extend this context and premise, is that for grassroots people to be able to engage with these things, we need social self-organization and mobilization.

It is important to recognize how little mitigation has been accomplished successfully in the decades this problem has been a 'priority' - the ineffectiveness of the efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to this point. Something hasn't been working.

These are very big problems, obviously, and the value of this piece you are reading, is to focus in on this specific topic of media and climate action.

(*When referring to climate action and related terms, that is also to include the challenging of different oppressions, exploitations, and problems that are can be interrelated with climate problems, and might fit with the 'climate justice' description)

We need to ask the appropriate question(s), in relation to media and the climate crisis, rather than be defined by what currently exists.

OVERALL QUESTION:
What does a communication media platform or system look like, that will effectively support the work of addressing the climate crisis?

To help clarify that somewhat…

CLARIFYING QUESTION:
If we weren't already accustomed to the existing media environment / ecology, where would we start in terms of defining our foundational communication needs with regards to the climate crisis?

The questions we ask are important, because they help shift our perspective of, and prioritize, what to look at. Albert Einstein had this to say:

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask… for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

To provide an example, that you may agree would be one of the ongoing global climate priorities, is the work to protect the Amazon rainforest and reverse the trend of deforestation. How would that be reflected in a media system?

As it currently stands, there are some people and groups who do have the Amazon rainforest as a top priority and are continually focused on it. But as a collective societal problem, it is mainly a passing news story every once in a while, with possibly an accompanying petition or solicitation of donations. How could that best be different?

Thinking through that can help engage with the inspirations here, of envisioning what we might need in terms of media.

ANOTHER STORY – INDYMEDIA

In the final months of 1999, there was a week of protest in Seattle to oppose and shut down the World Trade Organization meetings. Tens of thousands, possibly 80,000 or more, were in the streets, and effectively accomplished the goal of preventing the meetings.

Something that started there, was the Indymedia network, or Independent Media Centers.

It was revolutionary. What it introduced in a major way, was the concept and practice of open-publishing: you didn't need to create your own platform, but a central platform was there for you to then post your own content onto.

This was an anti-capitalist, activist-oriented project, doing something that wasn't otherwise available. Within a year or two, it had expanded globally to over 150 local sites around the world, all connected on one parent website and with a shared set of principles.

This open-publishing concept was the basis for what later inspired blog sites, video sites (like Youtube), and social media sites. But Indymedia itself, for the most part, wasn't able to continue as successfully. To say that was simply because of capitalism is an oversimplification, but it does help to understand how if things are able to make money / are profitable, they will usually much more effectively attract investment to grow, solidify, and continue their operations. But what we need is a different type of media system to grown, solidify, and continue.

WHAT PRIMARY ELEMENTS MIGHT THIS MEDIA BE BUILT AROUND?

If the majority of issues needing to be addressed, are best addressed through collective work in communities at a local level, then an effective media would help connect us with those local communities and facilitate that collective work. It would also likely need to shift us offline and into those collective physical spaces to a greater extent – the exact opposite of what are current social media are overall designed for.

Another function of the media we need, may be about directing resources – material resources: financial and 'in-kind'; as well as human resources: volunteer energy, mentorship, skill-sharing, mutual support, etc – towards our priorities, and the work on those priorities. This would include helping people find and connect with organizations and projects, and vice versa.

The above are just two possible ideas that come from a (my) particular perspective on what our priorities are and how we can achieve them. Generating clarity of such a perspective is a precondition to being able to accurately identify the major elements needed in this type of media platform or system.

A third, perhaps the most important functionality of such a media, aside from the overall design that organizes around or into priorities, would be a collaborativeness, some form of 'democratic' participation in the media platform itself, to harness our collective energies and intelligence.

These and other elements of a desired / required media system, already exist in different media platforms to varying extents. Helping people learn about and access events, organizations, and opportunities offline are primary components of many media. Websites like Kiva or GoFundMe, are based on helping redistribute resources to those looking for them. Collaborative tools range from Google Docs and survey apps, to custom organizing software like NationBuilder, and more – even Facebook groups.

The question then is, what could these elements look like and how would they work, situated within a larger media project or platform or system that centres collective organizing and action on the climate crisis?

Revisiting an idea stated earlier: It can help to imagine that there aren't the regular media platforms you are used to using, and from there, think what you would ideally be able – or need – to access, for yourself and others to be able to address climate circumstances of the present and of the potential future.

[*or maybe it was:*
"If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions."]

To somewhat sidetrack, another angle of question:

When we say "we" in asking the above questions, or in any discussion – who is the "we" referring to?

It could be extended to, what are the social and psychological dynamics of how we define this "we"? But for simplicity, continue with, who is this "we" we are referring to?

To illustrate the relevance of this: if the statement is, "We need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions", it's likely the "we" refers to society at large. That "we" isn't necessarily what "we" as individuals have much influence over, so it is fundamentally misleading in terms of our focus, in terms of what "we" can or must do. Shift the statement to, "The government / companies / society at large need to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases," or to, "We need to get the government/ companies/ society at large, to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases," and we shift our understanding of where "we" are situated in relation to the problem.

This illustrates how "we" can shift our focus and priorities of action. This may already be implicit, but in some instances it is important to articulate it explicitly: if "we" are talking about creating new media systems, for instance, it is important to understand who they are being created to serve, and who is involved in their creation.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE MEDIA, IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Starting with a story:

One of the coordinated days of climate action this past year (2019), following up on the very large protests of September 20 and 27, was on the last Friday in November, which is also Black Friday, the largest shopping day of the year.

A few decades ago, when Black Friday was a thing but nowhere near as big as it is now, Adbusters magazine began promoting a campaign to celebrate 'Buy

Nothing Day' on that day.

This of course as the name suggested, promoted the idea of declining to purchase anything that day. But it was also about public awareness actions.

Buy Nothing Day's main idea was to challenge the idea of consumerism, and in a bigger sense, to challenge the economic order that is based on unsustainable and unnecessary consumption.

This is very related to the anthropogenic climate change issue, specifically caused by the increasing consumption (combustion) of fossil fuels that is intertwined with human society's ever-increasing consumption of other resources.

It was in the late '90s and early '00s that Buy Nothing Day peaked. A decade after that, Adbusters issued the original call to 'Occupy Wall Street', that started a short-lived but impactful global movement, highlighting the issue of the economic ruling class, aka "the 1%."

There was a second campaign that Adbusters also led in the 1990s. It was a challenging of corporate media, specifically their refusal to air Adbusters' "uncommericials."

The three major US television networks – CNN was an exception-- refused to sell Adbusters airtime for their Buy Nothing Day ads. It was a blatant demonstration of the bias of the corporate media; this was captured in some of the responses from the networks.

CBS' vice-president of advertising standards was quoted by The Wall Street Journal as saying BND was "in opposition to the current economic policy in the United States." Adbusters reported in 1998 that ABC had communicated a shift in position and that they would "consider broadcasting any kind of creative subject matter submitted from the [Adbusters] Media Foundation," but with an anonymous ABC source following up to Adbusters, saying "But you have to remember that television is supported by advertiser dollars, it's extremely influential and change comes slowly." I'm not actually sure if they were in fact eventually successful in airing their BND spot on ABC or the other two major networks.

Adbusters also reported that they'd been able to get CBC to broadcast their 'Autosaurus' commercial – "It's 'coming! It's coming! The end of the automotive age!" – on CBC Newsworld's Driver's Seat program in 1993, only to have the program's automotive sponsors tell CBC to not do that again.

The above quotes from Postman may provide a flicker of recognition in relation to what you experience every day on social media platforms and with traditional media.

Some of the prevailing dynamics experienced in social media use – viral outrage; hollow clickbait temptations; the primacy of 'new' over 'relevant'; vicarious virtual participation mystique; social media 'bubbles' and the attendant distortions of understanding reality; distraction and procrastination; unsolicited generalized advice; etc – are all things that I think "we" should be discussing and coming to some conclusions on, conclusions that inspire individual and collective behaviour change. Given that these dynamics are a logical result of the platform's design, our behaviour change might most wisely including shifting to different existing platforms, and/or creating new ones.

From my current perspective, I think a most important ability of any media, especially in terms of what it could do in relation to the climate crisis (and similarly for other issues) is to create a structure that is organized – or more accurately, organizes – around our priorities

As opposed to an overload of information that won't help us in "solving" (taking action on) the issues needing to be addressed, we could have something that helps guide us, or that assists us to guide ourselves, to effective action aligned with our priorities.

How it might do that, is another dimension of consideration and discussion.

It would depend on what we think those priorities are. What we think our priorities – individual priorities, societal priorities, and in between – on the climate situation are, depend on our views on how social change works, and also on where "we" are located socially, within movements and communities and societies, within personal contexts and with specific concerns and circumstances, etc. They also depend on what kind of an ongoing process, implicitly or explicitly, we engage with to collectively consider and define those priorities.

The climate problem would fit well as another example of a problem that is not technical nor a result of inadequate information.

In that passage, he did also mention the potential of the Internet for "… expanding and enriching the tradition of writing technologies" in "creat[ing] new forms of literature."

But a decade later (in the Nov/Dec 2001 issue of Adbusters), he emphasized again the dangers of information, taking up a thread from his 1985 book "Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse In The Age Of Show Business":

> "Aldous Huxley was talking about this 50 years ago, when he said it wasn't so much the un-truth of information, but the complete irrelevance of information that was going to be the problem in the end. You keep people distracted, and keep them from addressing issues they need to address, by flooding them with all sorts of information about which they can do nothing."

Looking at media platforms, specifically news media, how many can you think of – traditional or new, corporate or alternative – that aren't primarily based on publishing more and more information?

Thus the need to explore and question what different types of media platforms and systems will be most helpful to us in addressing the climate crisis.

The unexamined assumptions we carry with us about what is helpful activism on the climate crisis, may also dangerously limit our imagining of what an effective media platform or system would do. The ideas that sharing articles and video, or engaging in protests, are somehow automatically linked to creating the change we need, is somewhere to start the examining.

As Jodi Dean notes, we need to recognize the "distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy," and that there often isn't a relation between the two. Changing policies – in government or elsewhere, where policies means behaviours and practices – is the type of change needed to address climate change.

The story starkly illustrates who the media serve: the major advertisers, and the hegemony of a capitalist consumer society.

The audience's attention is simply the product that the media companies sell to the advertisers. The primary purpose of for-profit* media companies is to make a profit – it is not to support efforts for justice, for human rights, for equitable human relations, for the natural environment, etc.

(*The vast majority of media content you consume is likely from for-profit (capitalist) media companies. There are some exceptions, but understanding the overall dynamic is very important.)

The corporate media system is not designed to ensure that it reports or broadcasts what is most important or useful in relation to action on the climate crisis.

Here are some additional questions that communicate a more detailed, nuanced, and comprehensive analyses of the problems with the corporate media:
  * What topics and whose voices are or aren't featured?
  * In what ways different topics and voices are featured when they are included?
  * What factors lead to those things happening.

The 'factors' of the third question, that are behind the outcomes covered in the first two questions, are springboards to perhaps even bigger questions:
  * Who owns the media?
  * Who makes the media's decisions?

Then there is perhaps the most important question that follows:
  * What impacts does all of this result in?

These are worthy things to explore, but this isn't the space to do so.

Now to segue from the structure and functions of traditional news media, to those of social media.

What is different about social media companies, from what was described above from the traditional media companies, in a general sense, is … nothing.

It could be said that the only major difference is that much more of the 'content' is user-created, which is a significant shift from passive audience (consumers) to dual-role creator-consumers. Another difference is that there are fewer major platforms: the current economy of the internet favours what are effectively oligopoly situations.

Maybe another major difference is that the 'message' of the medium is much more strongly about encouraging users to use the platform more often and longer. Having 'social' connections built into the platform, ensures users are dependent upon the platform itself for those connections.

The overall business model, is still to profit from the users' attention. There is the data mining and 'surveillance capitalism' part of it – a very big part that won't be discussed further here – but that is dependent on the primary aspect of capturing users' ongoing attention and engagement with the platform.

The technological features that social media companies have come to incorporate into their platforms – such as notifications, and biased algorithms that ensure you see certain things and not other things – exploit human psychological tendencies to make using their platforms addictive in a sense, and thus more profitable for the companies.

These companies are not designing their product to help ensure there is more democracy or justice or human rights in the world, or that we do better at taking action on climate change; they are designing it to maximize 'value' for their company, value measured in money.

This isn't to say there aren't certain aspects of the platforms that are beneficial for people in various ways, even specifically for the purposes of climate action – only that those benefits are part of a larger package which overall may be very detrimental in various important ways.

The same ideas apply to traditional media as well.

First step: Identify them!

The concept of "the medium is the message" – from noted academic, cultural critic and theorist Marshall McLuhan – aids in conveying an understanding of these ideas.

Even if it's not exactly what he meant with the phrase, understanding the 'message' of a medium as the 'real outcomes' it produces rather than its content (communicated information), is the important part. It's like being able to understand the forest as a whole, rather than defining it based upon the characteristics of individual trees or other flora or fauna.

With this, we can perceive that the for-profit, capitalist communication media system perpetuates the continuation and hyper-expansion of a commercial consumer society – at the expense of other things we may value more. That is its message. It is not its only 'message,' but it is one of the most important especially in relation to the climate situation.

Some questions to ask here, to bring clarity:
* What behaviours does this media system as a whole, groom people to enact? What are the impacts of this?
* In contrast, what behaviours do "we" feel are most necessary to address the climate crisis?
(Note the emphasis on the term "behaviours" and not on what the system provides to users.)

A more direct application of the "medium is the message" concept was described by another media critic, Neil Postman, in his 1992 book "Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology", published right at the beginnings of the Internet era:

> … the "message" of computer technology is comprehensive and domineering. The computer argues, to put it baldly, that the most serious problems confronting us at both personal and professional levels require technical solutions through fast access to information otherwise unavailable. ... Our most serious problems are not technical, nor do they arise from inadequate information. If a nuclear catastrophe occurs, it shall not be because of inadequate information. Where people are dying of starvation, it does not occur because of inadequate information. If families break up, children are mistreated, crime terrorizes a city, education is impotent, it does not happen because of inadequate information. Mathematical equations, instantaneous communication, and vast quantities of information have nothing whatever to do with any of these problems."