

STATES OF MEDIA+ENVIRONMENT

States of Environmentalist Media

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The state of our environment cannot be disassociated from political economies. Liberalism wound together colonialism, imperialism, and environmental devastation. Environmentalist media practices are informed by postcolonial critiques of liberalism's complicity with colonialism and imperialism (Mehta 1999; Sartori 2014) and their legacies in climate/economic refugees, slow violence, and the Anthropocene (Shiva 2005; Nixon 2011; Haraway 2016), all of which are accelerated and intensified under neoliberalism. Global climate disruption denial is presently gaining momentum through far-right-wing regimes in Brazil, India, Israel, the Philippines, Turkey, and the United States.

We need insurgent, empathetic strategies to rewire thinking about these urgencies:

- engaging nonalienating epistemological strategies
- understanding how global climate disruption disproportionately affects the most vulnerable
- mobilizing accountability into political action
- reconfiguring conventional understandings of human and nonhuman, consumer and producer, industrial and artisanal, political and artistic
- acknowledging how consumer, medical, and extractive waste produce environmental refugees

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Figure 1: Installation of Marina Zurkow's *Paradoxical Sleep* (2008) in the San Jose McEnery Convention Center, San Jose, California, United States.

Image courtesy of the artist and bitforms gallery.

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- interrogating the energy wasted by powering electronic junk mail, telemarketing, cable, and satellites

ENTWINING

Contemporary environmentalist media operates across many forms and platforms, from legacy formats of theatrical cinema and broadcast television to emerging digital and networked formats.

Since they consume large amounts of energy, digital technologies contribute to environmental catastrophes (Maxwell and Miller 2012; Starosielski and Walker 2016). Yet they also investigate complex entanglements between material and immaterial realms. We need to think about how natural and built environments, as well as physical and virtual environments, entwine. Environmentalist media can help us see community among human and nonhuman co-inhabitants. It facilitates the labor of empathy and community building to imagine collaborative, place-based solutions to environmental crises.

RECONFIGURING

Contemporary media ecologies aggregate and disseminate industrial and amateur content, extending and challenging analog modes. They enable community media in ways unimaginable a half century ago. Since community

media does not travel through festival or broadcast circuits, scholars largely ignored how its participatory functions afforded marginalized voices the means to intervene in state, corporate, and entertainment media.

Historically, community media shifted power relations to reconfigure interconnections among media, people, and place. Its politics of place forged on-the-ground discursive spaces around issues such as urban gentrification, water rights, genetically modified foods, health, industrial pollution, indigenous land rights, and anti-extraction movements. Community media chronicles grassroots countermovements around issues ranging from urban green space to digital commons and local histories.

Corporate reality television, on the other hand, monetizes underpaid and free labor while it stokes a destructive fantasy of participation through consumption. Fun and games camouflage neoliberal labor relations and amputate the unionized labor of writers. Social media influencers and farmed grassroots media manufacture "fake news." Cohabitating with activist media in obscured memes, they deliver reactionary distractions. Artificial intelligence—Facebots, Twitterbots—datafies online engagement siloed within echo chambers, creating obstacles to community. Neoliberal individualism interwoven within nationalist populist movements mobilizes against climate summits and environmental regulations.

Environmental media needs to confront not only polluters, carbon emitters, and oil and gas extractors but also big datafiers. The definition of *extraction* needs to expand from the mining of elements and resources to include the mining of human and nonhuman stories. Environmentalist media needs to recognize nonhuman inhabitants as agents, participants, and collaborators. It needs to adopt the term *global climate disruptions and catastrophes* to underscore urgency.

TRACKING

During times of crisis, the documentary genre experiences fleeting popularity. During the Great Depression, US audiences flocked to Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937). The film presented a hopeful message about hydroelectric energy generated from watersheds. *The River* is a manifesto for state-sponsored extraction, despite its radical Workers Film and Photo League–pedigreed crew. Although the 1938 Venice Film Festival awarded the film Best Documentary, both the Democratic and the Republican Parties denigrated it as propaganda. Hollywood studio heads considered any direct government-sponsored filmmaking a form of "socialism."

Seven decades later, Davis Guggenheim's theatrical release on global climate disruption, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), grossed nearly US\$50 million. Such stories are rare. Most documentaries never screen in cinemas. Environmentalist

documentaries rely on streaming services and university library purchases. However, they can bring us together to discuss environmentalism. Beyond the cinemas, we communicate with one another on social media platforms.

In *Blood in the Mobile* (Denmark/Germany, 2010), for example, Frank Piasechi Poulsen holds Nokia accountable by confronting its allegedly socially responsible corporate branding with information that links blood minerals in the contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo, which he situates historically alongside the physical and psychological violence of colonialism and resource extraction in the Congo Free State under Belgium's King Leopold II. Paramilitary groups exploit workers. Following the commodity chain, the film traces Congo-mined coltan through transit countries before its arrival at Nokia's factories in Finland. When the NGO Global Witness pressures Nokia to disclose its coltan source, the corporation must decide whether to accept ethical coltan mining's lower profits or admit it is an indirect financier of war. The film forces us to acknowledge our implication in planetary destruction and unethical labor practices. It outlines tensions between rights to clean water and clean air and rights to internet and mobile network access.

Another example is Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa's *Dying for Gold* (South Africa, 2019), which investigates 120 years of modern-day slavery in racialized extraction in South African gold mines. White-owned gold mining companies such as Anglo Gold, Goldfields, and Rainbow Minerals exposed black miners from southern African rural communities to silica dust. The miners now suffer from the world's worst epidemic of tuberculosis and silicosis. In the largest class action case in South African history, five hundred thousand families are affected. In ground-level tableau shots, miners and their families share stories of illness, poverty, suffering, and death. The film juxtaposes their testimonies with actors voicing state and mining company records, industrial documentaries, and state propaganda encouraging the rural poor to become miners. Partnering with NGOs, trade unions, community groups, and environmental health activists, the film facilitates dialogues among the mining industry, the South African government, and trade unions as it travels across southern Africa to be shown in improvisational rural cinemas.

MOBILIZING

Interactive documentaries largely reject closed explorations, refusing to treat subjects as monetizable extraction. With modular content that reconfigures and adapts, they design for the production of new insights. As these open-ended projects recombine data into analysis, they render contingencies and knowledge production salient (see Hudson and Zimmermann 2015).

The *Anti-Eviction Mapping Project* (United States, 2013–present; <https://www.antievictionmap.com/>) presents an ongoing activist database of information, maps, and resources to mobilize against gentrification with the tagline "Visualizing Bay Area Displacement and Resistance." The project

empowers communities to understand dispossession as well as historical and geographic erasure. Bay Area immigrant and working-class communities developed local businesses, identities, and vibrant cultures before the ascent of Apple, Alphabet (Google), and Facebook in California's Silicon Valley. New nonresident venture capitalists who acquire multiple properties for short-term Airbnb rentals pose threats. These properties often belong to longtime residents who are being forced out because of higher taxes, gentrification, and real-estate speculation. The *Anti-Eviction Mapping Project* layers participatory narratives, oral histories, maps, and murals, built with the open-source Ushahidi platform rather than the proprietary Google Maps.

The Black Gold—A Web Documentary (Ecuador/Denmark/Norway, 2017; <http://theblackgoldwebdoc.weebly.com/home.html>) builds an online journalism platform to investigate Norway's national oil-industry-derived wealth. It investigates how to maintain Norway's economic stability yet also safeguard its environment. Discovered in the North Sea in 1969, oil accounts for more than half of Norway's exports. This project refutes US media narratives that only Gulf Arabs, Iranians, Nigerians, and Venezuelans possess oil wealth. A dialectic between different positions on oil, extraction, and renewables, it features vast information on Greenpeace and on Statoil, the Norway-based multinational petroleum company. *The Black Gold* visualizes quantitative data with interactive charts and graphs. Analyzing extractive industries, these visualizations meld investment categories, renewables in gross electricity generation and consumption, and qualitative and quantitative research.

IMMERSING

Thinking about immersive media is typically confined to fantasies about the latest corporate-produced 4D and VR devices designed to make us believe we are someplace else. Immersion, however, also takes other forms. When we walk into public squares in modern cities like Seoul, Tokyo, New York, or London, media immerses us. Screens are ubiquitous in public advertising spaces or in our hands as work appendages. They create material hinges between the human, the nonhuman, and the virtual.

These screens project images into our sightlines *and* surveil us with machine gazes and CCTV cameras. Satellite news images of power and catastrophe on hanging screens invade airports, hotels, and universities, removing control over what is seen—and not seen. Environmentalist mobile media can infiltrate these screens, augmenting experiences of place, history, and the present.

At the McEnery Convention Center in San Jose, California, Marina Zurkow's *Paradoxical Sleep* (United States, 2008) invaded advertising screens (figures 1 and 2). Its digitally animated images of an overflowing Guadalupe River interrupted these screen spaces that usually broadcast live events. Imaginary



Figure 2: Animated image from Zurkow's *Paradoxical Sleep* (2008), displayed on video screens in the San Jose McEnery Convention Center and suggesting that the Guadalupe River is overflowing into the space.

Image courtesy of the artist and bitforms gallery.

flooded spaces speculated real catastrophes. The project visualized repressed scenarios, postulating that built environments might not protect us from climate disruptions and catastrophes.

The NGO Zochrot's *iNakba* mobile app (Israel, 2014) augments reality as users access information on Palestine's dispossessed villages and razed orchards, comparing contemporary spaces with repressed histories of the 1948 *Nakba* (the Arabic word for "catastrophe"). The project considers the environmental catastrophes generated by humans rather than by nature, and the substandard living conditions of refugees, with sewage, power, and water systems deliberately rendered insufficient. The project's mobile screens decipher entangled built, natural, and political environments.

GALVANIZING

Environmental media exists in a heterogeneous ecology with multiple and mutable iterations. It galvanizes epistemological and embodied shifts to think *differently* about the environment's entanglements:

- to migrate relentlessly through different forms and platforms
- to catch legacy epistemologies off guard, so new alignments, allies, and politics can break open

- to offer hope for agency, community, destabilizations, and mobilizations



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