

Playlist

(Not) Environmental Media

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Rarities

Searching the *Canadian Journal of Communication* archives for instances of *environmental media* prior to 2015 yields precisely one result. The term appears as a keyword to index Chris Russill's 2013 article, "Forecast Earth: Hole, Index, Alert." Of course, its absence in the archives makes sense. Environmental media studies, as a field, seems to have cohered around 2012, with several landmark books—such as *Greening the Media* (Maxwell & Miller, 2012) and *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Tsing, 2015)—published only after that. Not finding anything in the archives had nothing to do with the journal's omissions and everything to do with looking in the wrong direction.

What was I looking for? What is an environmental media playlist *about*? I thought of the field's greatest hits, so to speak. I flipped through the archives using *environment*, *Earth*, *land*, and *water* as keywords. These words led me to *oceans* and *storms*, then *signals* and *alerts*. With each new search, I watched new titles appear—euphonic and catchy, but not exactly right. Some tunes capture the zeitgeist. That is what I was seeking.

As I carried out search after search, I reflected on conversations I have had with environmental media leaders around the world. Working together at the Environmental Media Lab (EML), Mél Hogan and I speak often with leaders of labs, research centres, and artist collectives, and we keep hearing the same questions: How can we work better together? What does it look like to build teams that collaborate both actively and meaningfully? What should it look like to lead them?

Working better and working better together are vital to helping the planet transition through this time of catastrophe and into another period of systemic balance. And we do not have the luxury of time. We cannot take three, five, or 10 years to build research coalitions that are aligned in purpose and method. We need to look at models that scholars have already analyzed and documented.

B-sides

The playlist I put forward for environmental media is not, then, explicitly about environmental media. It is about ways to do environmental media work. To my mind, this depends just as much on organizational effectiveness as it does on scholarly ability. In fact, it depends urgently on scholars who are willing to think differently: to consider leadership and team building above all else.

Comprising five articles, this collection intersects with the need for interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and inter-community collaboration that can accelerate efforts to repair damage done during the Anthropocene. Each article in the collection documents, generates, or questions team and leadership models. In surfacing these articles for (re)reading and consideration, my aim is to call attention to our working practices and to interrogate the extent to which they support planetary wellness and degrowth.¹

I think of this collection as B-sides. B-sides are the tracks you did not necessarily buy the (environmental media) album for, but they might be the reason you keep it. You might have begun reading this text thinking you would find a brief literature review on the infrastructural turn, data centres, or the materiality of digital media. You might have thought this short work would locate you against a certain past. I hope, instead, that it orients you toward the future.

Playlist

Article 1



Grosjean, Sylvie. (2008). Communication dans un centre de répartition des urgences 911. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 33(1), 101–120.
doi:10.22230/cjc.2008v33n1a1930

As Sylvie Grosjean points out in this article's introduction, a number of ethnographers have documented co-operative work in emergency co-ordination centres and high-stress environments, such as air traffic control centres. This is Grosjean's objective, too. Here, she describes "les savoir-faire communicationnels" (p. 101)—the communication skills and know-how—of emergency dispatchers. This is to say that the article, very literally, documents the practicalities of collaboration when the stakes are high. Looking to Grosjean's work gives us insight into the team- and trust-building systems we can implement—Grosjean observes and discusses language, gestures, tone of voice, and desk set-up, among other subjects—while we collectively respond to crises of different scales.

Article 2



Dubinsky, Lon. (2006). In praise of small cities: Cultural life in Kamloops, BC. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31(1), 85–106.
doi:10.22230/cjc.2006v31n1a1751

Do not skip to the end in this one. The recommendations that Lon Dubinsky makes in the conclusion are not what is relevant to the topic at hand. Rather, Dubinsky offers several poignant observations throughout the text about what binds people together and fosters a “culture of participation” (p. 86) in a small town. I took the liberty of redefining “small town” as a geographically proximate community invested in similar goals: a localized team. In doing so, I found this article generated thinking about how to create teams people *want* to be on.

Article 3



Klenk, Nicole L., & Hickey, Gordon M. (2010). Communication and management challenges in large, cross-sector research networks: A Canadian case study. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 35(2), 239–259. doi: 10.22230/cjc.2010v35n2a2315

I want to draw your attention specifically to pages 256–258, wherein Nicole Klenk and Gordon Hickey emphasize several points that are hard learned on the ground (I learned the hard way, during a decade-long career in corporate communication). Not least of all, in every team of every size on every project, leaders must clearly communicate roles, responsibilities, goals, and expectations. When team members’ perceptions of any of these things differ, the project is at significant risk. In our practice at the EML, we begin every project with this discussion, and we frequently return to it, with goal-oriented questions such as, “What is your understanding today of where we’re headed?” and expectation-alignment questions such as, “How can I support you in the next month?”

Article 4



Ashley, Susan L.T. (2006). Heritage institutions, resistance, and praxis. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31(3), 639–658. doi: 10.22230/cjc.2006v31n3a1746

Susan Ashley’s work discusses the praxis of interpreters, “tour guides, naturalists, educators, visitor services staff, or resource managers” (p. 644), in “heritage institutions such as museums, parks, and historic sites” (p. 642). What stands out is Ashley’s meticulous description of interpreters’ methods, practice, and language aimed at bringing about social change. Moreover, Ashley emphasizes interpreters’ focus on creating experiences for their audiences as opposed to, say, lectures or lessons. This article is especially relevant to leaders and teams whose work is community-facing. Equally important, the article serves as a reminder that looking outside the academy for models of both leadership and scholarship is incredibly useful.

Article 5



Flynn, Terence. (2014). Do they have what it takes: A review of the literature on knowledge, competencies, and skills necessary for the twenty-first-century public relations practitioners in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 39(3), 361–384. doi: 10.22230/cjc.2014v39n3a2775

Big questions loom over this article: What competencies do we need to be effective in what we do? Which skills do our teams collectively need to practice in order to carry out our work? Terence Flynn traces the evolution of skills requirements for public relations practitioners from about 2000 to 2010, and in doing so, he prompts readers to reflect on the skills we have been told we need, the skills that are truly valuable to the work we do, and the contrast between them. This article reminds me that often the skills that appear time and again on job ads in particular fields (e.g., “communication skills” in PR) are uselessly vague. In a time of climate crisis, we cannot afford to be vague or anachronistic. Flynn’s piece, then, is a call to action to catalogue the true skills, competencies, and knowledge that are meaningful and necessary to team members carrying out environmental media work.

Other stuff²

One of our priorities at the EML is to build engaged, sustainable teams and networks. To do this, we draw on our own personal work experiences as well as scholarship such as the articles above. We would love to know more. We would be grateful to receive your anecdotes or to learn about scholarship you feel is vital to the project of becoming strong leaders and cultivating exceptional teams. As such, we invite you to get in touch at eml@ucalgary.ca or [@EnvMediaLab](https://twitter.com/EnvMediaLab) (on Twitter).

Notes

1. I use *degrowth* in place of *sustainability* thanks to Mél Hogan. She has pointed out that deploying the word *sustainability* begs the question: What is being sustained?
2. The subheads in this playlist are borrowed from Sarah McLachlan’s 1996 album, *Rarities, B-Sides & Other Stuff*. The album is a result of many collaborations between McLachlan and others, which is one reason I found it fitting to use her words in this text. Moreover, McLachlan is well known for her philanthropic work. For one particularly relevant example, see the story behind McLachlan’s video for “World on Fire” (Media that Matters, 2007).

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