

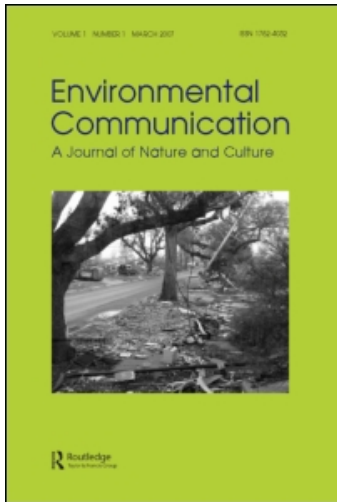
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# TreeHuggerTV: Re-Visualizing Environmental Activism in the Post-Network Era

Lisa D. Slawter

*As a collection of online videos that explores how to create, consume, and live in environmentally responsible ways, TreeHuggerTV offers a productive site for examining environmental activism at the intersection of nature and culture. This paper looks at TreeHuggerTV as a form of environmental activism that emerges on post-network television. This analysis traces how TreeHuggerTV productively re-visualizes the environment, environmentalists, and environmentalism. In the online videos, the environment appears in the urban landscapes where people live, environmentalists are shown as “hip, not hippie,” and environmentalism is manifested in the form of green consumerism. Despite the limitations of consumer-driven forms of environmentalism, the author examines the potential of this environmental activism that embraces human culture in relation to the environment. While promoting green consumption may fail to push viewers beyond individual and incremental forms of activism, TreeHuggerTV creates an accessible entrance into environmentalism for viewers in a commercial medium. The fragmented viewing audience of this post-network form of television further indicates that this consumer environmentalism operates as a productive supplement to, rather than replacement of, other forms of environmental activism. The interplay between the form and content of TreeHuggerTV represents an important site to begin studying the future of environmental activism and its intersections with new media developments such as post-network television.*

**Keywords:** *TreeHuggerTV; Environmental Activism; Post-Network Television; Green Consumerism*

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In a 2006 interview in *Time* magazine, Graham Hill—blogger and creator of TreeHugger.com—observed that “cable, network, and the internet are slamming together.” While this remark hardly qualifies as revolutionary, Hill’s subsequent assertion that “there will be a role for online video in combination with advertising” is more suggestive (Cartwright, 2006). Although Hill fails to articulate more specifically what this role might be, TreeHuggerTV, the collection of online videos associated with his TreeHugger blog, offers an important site for investigation. Launched in February 2006, TreeHuggerTV produces weekly “episodes” that are “dedicated to everything that has a modern aesthetic yet is environmentally responsible” (TreeHuggerTV, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Most TreeHuggerTV episodes feature a variety of alternative, creative, and environmentally responsible products, services, and ways of living, with topics on how to “green” everything from your food to your transportation, your shower, and even your sex life. Viewers may access these short two- to five-minute online videos via a free podcast subscription or at any number of webpages, including BlipTV, YouTube, Google video, and most directly, at TreeHugger.com (Oppenheim, 2006). In addition to watching online videos, viewers of TreeHuggerTV are invited to participate by clicking on links, commenting on episodes, submitting tips, and even uploading videos to be featured in future episodes.

The emergence of TreeHuggerTV coincides with a larger trend described by one green website editor in *The New York Times*: “green-focused Web sites are getting about as trendy as celebute D.U.I.’s” (Mitchell, 2007). As a subsection of the larger TreeHugger blog, TreeHuggerTV is part of one of the biggest and most popular environmental sites. The TreeHugger blog began in 2004 and now receives nearly two million unique visitors per month, a consistent top 20 ranking out of over 75 million blogs, and increasing attention from mainstream media, including *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Business Week*, *Time*, *The Martha Stewart Show*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Flint, 2006; Green, 2007; Mitchell, 2007; Mustafa, 2006; TreeHugger, 2007). TreeHuggerTV has also received individual attention as the Vloggie Awards dubbed it the “Best Green Vlog” in 2006 and *Business Week* credited the online videos for helping TreeHugger double its audience size (Aster, 2006; Green, 2007). The growing number and popularity of environmental websites such as TreeHugger raises questions about the significance of such sites and calls us to attend more closely to the question implicitly posed by Hill about the role of online video in today’s media environment.

Aside from the inclusion of “treehugger” and “TV” in its name, TreeHuggerTV seems to part ways with traditional iterations of environmentalism and television. By analyzing TreeHuggerTV as a form of environmental activism, I raise a number of questions. What are the possibilities for environmental activism in the post-network era of television? Can alternative sites for “television” facilitate productive environmental activism? Further, if TreeHuggerTV is environmental activism, what kinds of intersections between nature and culture does it promote? I begin to answer these questions by situating this case study within earlier scholarly conversations about the cultural role of television, the presentation of environmentalism and human–environment relations on television, and the changing characteristics of television in the post-network era. I then turn to the episodes of TreeHuggerTV to analyze how

the online videos present the environment, environmentalists, and environmental activism. Drawing on examples from a range of episodes, I show how TreeHuggerTV offers a vision of the environment as the landscapes in which people live, environmentalists as “hip, not hippie,” and environmentalism as green consumption. Recognizing the interplay between the form and content of TreeHuggerTV, I assert that it offers a productive supplement to other forms of environmental activism, but I caution against a wholehearted celebration of the potential for these online videos. That is, TreeHuggerTV productively re-visualizes the environment, environmentalists, and environmentalism, but it does so through the medium of post-network television. Although the proliferation of media and channels allows for the incorporation of different perspectives of the environment and environmentalists on TreeHuggerTV, the fragmented post-network form may also minimize the impact on “mainstream” audiences. While the convergence of media forms may amplify the commercialization of communication and facilitate a connection between consumption and environmental advocacy, the consumer form may also fail to push viewers beyond individual and incremental forms of action. Recognizing these possibilities and limitations, I conclude the essay by reflecting on the future of environmental activism and its intersections with new media developments such as post-network television.

### **Television as a Site for Environmental Activism?**

Before delving into specific studies of television’s role in environmental activism, it is helpful to begin with a larger consideration of television as a medium of social, cultural, and political significance. Numerous scholars recognize the role that television plays in offering viewers different repertoires of behavior and perspectives. Newcomb and Hirsch (1985) suggest that “it is television as a whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in American culture” (p. 281). Saenz (1994) describes how television shapes social knowledge and in doing so “elaborates a fund of implicit knowledge which viewers turn to personal interpretive ends” (p. 576). More recently, Lembo (2007) describes how “[t]elevision can figure importantly in the ways that people think about and deal with problems or issues in their own lives” (p. 465). Bodroghkozy (2007) analyzes how television programming “participates in and serves as a terrain for the cultural negotiation over changing social and political experiences” (p. 38). Hartley (2004) uses an analogy to locate television at “the heart of civil society, private life, and everyday culture” (p. 411). He asserts that:

Just as the popular press of the nineteenth century was responsible for the creation of the mass reading public, and hence the public, so TV became the place where and the means by which, a century later, most people got to know about most other people and about publicly important events or issues. (p. 411)

This sampling of scholarship demonstrates the widely held belief that television may function as an arena where viewers confront larger social, cultural, and political

questions and ideas. As such, television may function more specifically as a place where viewers confront their ideas of and relationships to the natural world.

Although television holds this potential to act as a site for political engagement, some scholars emphasize a more negative view of its political possibilities. Television may offer a range of different views, but it also presents them in ways that can prevent viewers from acting. Gitlin (1994) highlights the potential for television to discourage political action as he questions how “the *formal* devices of TV prime time programs encourage viewers to experience themselves as anti-political, privately accumulating individuals” (p. 518). Bennett (1995) emphasizes the limitations of television news in his analysis of how media personalizes, dramatizes, fragmentizes, and normalizes news stories. Such studies suggest that although television may be very good at presenting a range of perspectives and connecting viewers to issues at a personal level, it may also fall short of facilitating viewers to engage controversial topics and issues in more active and public ways.

A number of scholars have pursued this sort of critique with respect to the presentation of environmental issues on television. As with television theorists in general, environmental media scholars recognize that many people come to know the environment, learn about environmental issues, and construct understandings of human–nature relationships through television viewing practices. Meister and Japp (2002) argue that “[c]ertainly, for non experts, understandings of environmental issues and policies are constructed from such mediated news reports, literature, or entertainment” (p. 3). In Anderson’s (1997) examination of “media, culture, and the environment,” she, too, recognizes that media are “at the heart of processes of political negotiation . . . they provide us with the frames with which to assimilate and structure information about a whole range of social problems and issues” (p. 18). Anderson critiques the way that news media frame environmental issues, characterizing them as problematic gatekeepers that function—along the lines of Bennett’s critique—to simplify stories and highlight environmental problems as short-lived controversies. In addition to television coverage that fails to explore environmental issues in depth, other scholars critique the selection of sources that inform environmental reporting. Delicath and DeLuca (2003) recognize the potential for television news coverage of environmental issues to exclude certain environmental perspectives in their assertion that “television is not a level playing field . . . Subaltern publics, social movements, and environmental groups in particular, face a number of obstacles in terms of their access to the most important arena of public discourse” (p. 318).

Others move beyond this focus on environmental news reporting to critique the way that television presents environmental issues in other programming as well. Two common themes of critique are: (1) television’s reduction of the environment to a commodity that is important only in terms of its use-value; and (2) television’s portrayal of the environment as something that is separate from people and the places where people live. Meister and Japp (2002) represent the first critique in their introduction to *Enviropop: Studies in Environmental Rhetoric and Popular Culture*:

Popular culture (through the powerful modes of advertising, board games, newscasts, print news, cable television, greeting cards, film, and animated cartoons) teaches us to emphasize nature's 'use-value.' Simply, we consciously and unconsciously learn from popular culture the practice of consuming nature. (p. 1)

They go on to explain why this orientation of consumption and use-value is problematic by contrasting consumption to activism. They claim that "[g]reen messages in popular culture are in no way promoting activism but are, rather, exceedingly consumption oriented. In this respect, nature is both the means and the end of consumption" (p. 7). Meister and Japp point out how nature is consumed not only in the form of raw materials used to produce goods, but also in less tangible forms as images, experiences, and representations of nature and environmental practices are used to promote the consumption of products.

In Corbett's (2002) analysis of the use of nature images in advertisements, she too, troubles the consumer frame that permeates representations of the environment on television. She suggests that "[a]dvertising commodifies the natural world and attaches material value to non-material goods, treating natural resources as private and possessible, not public and intrinsic" (p. 143). Corbett further describes how "[n]ature-as-backdrop ads portray an anthropocentric, narcissistic relationship to the biotic community and focus on the environment's utility and benefit to humans" (p. 143). From automobile ads to Hamms Beer commercials to allergy medication promotions, the use of "nature-as-backdrop" makes nature a "convenient, culturally relevant tool to which meanings can be attached for the purpose of selling goods and services" (p. 142). Studies such as these both explicitly and implicitly suggest that utility-based representations of nature shut down possibilities for engaging in environmental activism.

In Japp and Japp's (2002) examination of the Home and Garden Network's television series *The Good Life*, they critique environmental representations as both commodified and distant from people. They analyze how, in the program, "the natural environment becomes yet another commodity, to be owned or appropriated as part of the simple lifestyle" (p. 83). They demonstrate how the show's visual reduction of nature to "an aesthetic" works to complement "the verbal drama's definition of nature as a choice of lifestyle, implying that a beautiful environment exists to satisfy human desires but failing to assign any responsibility for preserving that environment" (pp. 91–92). In addition to this first critique, Japp and Japp also call attention to the show's implication that:

the good life takes place in select localities, in rural, sparsely populated, attractive, and relatively unspoiled places such as the slopes of the Rockies, the foothills of the Appalachians, the ocean, lakefront, or bayou, in quaint New England towns, in other rural and unspoiled beauty spots of the nation. (p. 92)

This critique of representations of nature as separate from people appears in the work of other scholars as well. For example, in Hope's (2002) analysis of "Environment as Consumer Icon in Advertising Fantasy," she describes how:

the most frequent fantasy presents nature as somewhere else, distanced from everyday life and work—accessible and available as a reward to affluent consumers. The fantasy further enables consumers to deny connections between consumption and ecological degradation by evoking the powerful myth of earthly paradise in lush and sensuous images. Nature is exotic, preserved for the righteous, somewhere far away. (p. 172)

The intertwined critiques of television's representations of the environment as both a product of consumption and as something removed from the daily and immediate experience of individuals permeate much of the critical scholarship on media constructions of the environment. However, not all analyses are so negative. A number of scholars have taken a more optimistic view of the presentation of environmental issues on television. In Todd's (2002) examination of *The Simpsons* as "an expression of environmental activism," she is hopeful about television's potential as a political medium (p. 65). Todd suggests that:

*The Simpsons* functions as a form of environmental activism and thus reveals popular culture's effectiveness as a medium for ecological commentary. The show increases public awareness of environmental issues, and educates the television audience while entertaining them. (p. 78)

Todd expresses further optimism about such environmental activism on television because "[t]elevision media enjoy a substantially larger audience than traditional rhetorical settings" (p. 67). In addition to the potential for productive environmental content on entertainment programs, other scholars recognize news programming as a site for environmental activism. DeLuca (1999) examines how environmental advocates can use mediated formats to engage audiences on environmental issues in his analysis of the "image events" staged by environmental groups to attract media coverage. He suggests that "staging image events for mass media dissemination" is "the primary rhetorical tactic of radical environmental groups" (p. xii).

The possibility for television to function as a productive site for environmental activism depends not only on the way that environmental content is presented, but also upon developments in the medium of television itself. As I suggested earlier, as a series of online videos, TreeHuggerTV represents an alternative site of television. However, these online videos might not even enter into the realm of consideration as "television" were television itself not in the midst of a period of transformation. A number of scholars discuss the increasing convergence of television with other media including the internet, computers, and even cell phones (Gripsrud, 2004; Uricchio, 2004). As Spigel (2004) suggests in her introduction to *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, "[t]elevision—once the most familiar of everyday objects—is now transforming at such rapid speeds that we no longer really know what 'TV' is at all" (p. 6). Some scholars discuss the current period of television as the "post-network" era, but even this raises more questions than it answers (Caldwell, 2004; Lotz, 2007; Newcomb, 2007b; Spigel & Olsson, 2004). In Lotz's (2007) examination of television industry production practices and the impact of "post-network structural changes" on programming, she suggests that "[t]he emerging nature of the post-network era makes it an invaluable site of study for determining larger patterns . . . The post-network era

is still very much defined by uncertainty for both its practitioners and academic researchers” (p. 242).

Although, as I discussed above, many scholars view television as a forum for confronting social, cultural, and political ideas, the destabilization of what “television” is raises questions about this role. Newcomb (2007b) describes post-network as a term that “identifies a fundamental alteration in the cultural role of television” (p. 562). Spigel and Olsson (2004) suggest that “television and new forms of electronic media contribute to our sense of place, nation, community, borders, and cultural contact with distant others” (p. 245). Other studies also suggest that the movement of television to alternative spaces in the post-network era has significant impact on its social and political roles (Everett, 2004; McCarthy, 2001; Ovalle, 2004). Despite the uncertainty surrounding this time of transition, three characteristics of the post-network era merit further discussion. The proliferation of television channels and convergence with other forms of media in the post-network era allows for: (1) the potential inclusion of previously excluded perspectives; (2) the fragmentation and erosion of a mainstream viewing audience; and (3) the fusion of interests such as commercial and activist.

One important feature of post-network television is the opening of the medium to groups who have traditionally been excluded or whose representations on television have been constrained in narrow ways. With the “demise of the three-network system in the United States . . . the rise of multichannel cable and global satellite delivery . . . Internet convergence . . . and new forms of media” the number of sites for “television” dramatically increased (Spigel, 2004, p. 2). This increase in number corresponds to the increasing inclusion of formerly excluded perspectives. In Everett’s (2004) examination of the role of the Internet in the Million Woman March, she discusses how “the decentralizing communicative force of the Internet marks a significant rupture in television’s historic containment and co-optation of black women’s ‘sass’” (p. 229). This represents one instance of an alternative site of “television” circumventing restrictions held by traditional television. The black women in Everett’s study were able to make “use of the Internet to orchestrate a massive grassroots movement, even in the face of disinterest from the mainstream channels of broadcast journalism” (p. 226). Everett describes the women’s use of the Internet as enabling them to “undo their representational enslavement in the racialized agenda-setting economy of broadcast television’s master class . . . to disrupt and reveal broadcast television’s denial (at the time) of the Internet as a viable, real-world broadcast alternative” (p. 235). Ovalle (2004) also calls attention to the importance of the Internet as a site where excluded groups can come together as a community. Alternative sites for television thus become even more significant in cases, such as the one Ovalle considers with Pocho.com, involving “a group that has traditionally been denied a place by mainstream media” (p. 328). By adopting the conventions of network television websites, Pocho.com uses subversion and satire to critique racial stereotypes and reclaim a subordinated Mexican American identity. The website offers a “re-presentation of Chicano cultural icons and stereotypes in an effort to ‘place’ or ‘imagine’ the self in the mass media imagery on the northern side

of the border” (p. 325). In the post-network era, new types of “television” not only offer activist groups additional opportunities for obtaining representation in the media, but also help to construct a new climate in which viewers have different expectations of and experiences with “television.”

A second significant feature of post-network television is the increasing fragmentation of audiences and the effective erosion of any sort of mainstream audience. Although the proliferation of channels and media allows for the introduction of new types of programming, it also leads to the loss of a more centralized audience. Newcomb (2007b) suggests that during the network era, television provided “content that would appeal to and inform ‘mass’ audiences or significant ‘segments’ of that audience” (p. 575). In contrast, the post-network era is marked by a decline in television as “the medium of shared experience” (Newcomb, 2007a, p. xi). In Spigel’s (2007) analysis of post-9/11 television culture, she writes:

The fact that there is no longer a three-network broadcast system means that citizens are not collected as aggregate audiences for national culture. As we all know, what we watch on TV no longer really is what other people watch—unless they happen to be in our demographic taste culture. The postnetwork system is precisely about fragmentation and narrowcasting. (p. 640)

In addition to television programming with “content more precisely targeted to specific audiences and interests,” audiences undergo a more fragmented viewing experience as they “dip in and out of an immersive sea of interface postings, surfing past the interplay of news headlines, TV promos, chat rooms, media criticism, weather reports, advertising pop-ups, and self-help columns as these flash across the increasingly segmented computer screen” (Newcomb, 2007a, p. 245; Spigel, 2004, p. 5). Newcomb (2007b) borrows from sociologist Bernard Miege’s description of the “logic of publishing” to describe post-network television as a “bookstore, a newstand, or a library” in which “selections are now far more numerous, more tailored to specific interests . . . and increasingly available on a more user-determined schedule” (pp. 575–576).

A final significant characteristic of post-network television is that of convergence itself. In the post-network era, television converges with other media so that viewers may watch “television” not only on the TV, but also on screens such as computers and iPods. This development brings the concerns of television into the realm of the broader Internet experience. In light of this convergence, it makes sense to take into account Internet scholarship on social activism. In Chadwick’s (2006) discussion of “the impact of the internet on group and movement politics,” he suggests that the internet can create permanent information networks, facilitate more diverse political coalitions, and further fuse politics and culture (p. 134). Chadwick’s celebration of the Internet as a site for social, cultural, and political engagement resonates with the role of television discussed above. Similarly, Chadwick finds the saturation of consumption on the Internet problematic. Although Chadwick recognizes the productive potential of the Internet for social activism, he laments the link between the content of internet sites and the need to attract advertiser revenue: “[b]y slavishly

focusing on consumer identities, [internet] community sites have little space for political discussion and, ironically, are perhaps less useful for political mobilization” (p. 109). While Chadwick rejects the potential of activist–consumer connections, he recognizes the significance of the Internet as a site where politics fuses with culture and the commercial fuses with other interests. It is just this fusion that Graham Hill speaks to when he refers to “online video in combination with advertising.” In Newcomb’s overview of television criticism, he writes that “American TV is defined most fundamentally . . . by its commercialism” (Newcomb, 2007a, p. 6). As media forms converge in the post-network era, the commercial nature of television spreads to infuse these new forms as well.

As Spigel (2007) calls attention to the “new multichannel and multiplatform system of niche culture,” she asks what these new forms in the post-network era “offer beyond the proliferation of products and styles” (p. 643). Keeping this question in mind, I turn now to examine the episodes of TreeHuggerTV. Based on this framework of existing literature on the changing role of television as a social, cultural, and political forum, particularly with respect to environmental issues, I argue that TreeHuggerTV supplements existing forms of environmental activism, offering an alternative to many forms of environmentalism currently portrayed in the media.

### Re-Visualizing Environmental Activism and Television on TreeHuggerTV

TreeHuggerTV offers a rich site for examining the role of online videos as one variation of post-network “television” that may give voice to environmental perspectives excluded from mainstream media representations. Although TreeHuggerTV does not explicitly identify re-visualizing environmentalism as a goal, the site is out to reform traditional approaches to environmental activism. TreeHuggerTV’s focus is “how to make environmentalism relevant” (Knox, 2006). The associated blog identifies the goal “to make sustainability mainstream” (TreeHugger, 2006). A *Vanity Fair* article about the site describes Hill as “a blogger on a mission: he’s out to prove that green is cool” (Flint, 2006). In working to make environmentalism mainstream, TreeHuggerTV challenges a number of assumptions about environmentalists and ultimately provides a different visualization of environmental activism, in which the environment is shown as the inhabited place where people live, environmentalists are modern urbanites, and environmentalism is green consumption.

One common critique of representations of the environment on television that I identified in the previous section revolves around depictions of the environment as separate and distant from people. TreeHuggerTV combats these types of representations by featuring stories of caring for the environment in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> For many of the episodes, TreeHuggerTV takes viewers into the heart of New York City, where they can find greener ways to shop, eat, travel, and socialize (TreeHuggerTV, 2006e, f, j, k, 2007). These episodes feature environmentalism, but there is no pristine “nature” in sight. The environment, rather, is the urban landscape of cement buildings and crowded streets. Other episodes highlight the environment in California cities by featuring urban tree-plantings, sustainable skateboard designs, and an alternative

environmental charter school program (TreeHuggerTV, 2006d, g, i). Some of these episodes feature more traditional markers of the environment such as trees and soil, but these are always in the context of urban landscapes. Even when the videos venture out of the city landscape and into suburban areas with more recognizable markers of the “environment,” the focus of the videos is literally on the environment in the places where people live. For example, in the “Edible Estates” episode, viewers see project organizer Fritz Haeg work to transform an ordinary suburban lawn into an edible landscape (TreeHuggerTV, 2006a). The episode features Haeg’s interest in the issues of land use and food production and presents his goal for edible estates: “to have everyone that comes into contact with the project in whatever way reconsider how they occupy the land.” Although the episodes vary greatly in their approach to “environmental responsibility,” one common thread is that the environment is not distant, but rather immediate to where people live. The “environment” displayed by TreeHuggerTV’s environmentalism is not pristine wilderness, but an occupied, usable landscape. Protecting this environment is not a choice between people or nature, but rather a choice for or against both people and nature together. By bringing conceptions of the environment back into places where people live, TreeHuggerTV gives viewers a stronger sense of connection to the environment in urban and suburban landscapes, and, by association, a stronger sense of responsibility to protect and use that environment responsibly.

In addition to re-visualizing the environment, TreeHuggerTV also re-envisioned superficial representations of environmentalists. Although TreeHuggerTV uses the name “treehugger,” it does so in a way that revises what a treehugger physically looks like. DeLoach, Bruner, and Gossett’s (2002) analysis of the “grammar and the rhetoric of the tree-hugger label in popular newspaper accounts” suggests why such a revision might be beneficial to environmentalists, as the study reveals a number of problems associated with the “treehugger” identifier (p. 95). The “tree-hugger label is used to reduce environmentalists and environmental advocacy to absurdity” (p. 97). As such, the label functions as a hindrance to environmental advocacy. Even when “treehugger” is used not by critics, but instead as “a self-identifier by environmentalists,” DeLoach *et al.* suggest that this “may serve to delegitimize their own discourse” (p. 100). They argue that:

the tree-hugger label has serious liabilities for effective environmental advocacy. The tree-hugger label is too graphic, too concrete, to become the basis of a widespread and positive discourse. The graphic, visual nature of the tree-hugger label lends itself to reduction to absurdity. Very few persons actually hug trees. Therefore, the image seems comic. A more ambiguous, open, and flexible label has greater potential for positive, popular use in the future. (p. 105)

TreeHuggerTV challenges the validity of this warning that “the tree-hugger label cannot escape its specificity,” by seeking to provide new visual associations to accompany it (p. 106).

Graham Hill specifically identifies this goal in his explanation of the origin of the TreeHugger concept:

The first time [the concept] manifested physically was in 2000, when I took a Photoshop class with an assignment to create fake ads—I did three. I essentially took three different pictures that I ripped out of magazines of cool urban types, two guys and one girl, and then superimposed text over the middle of the photograph. The words were *treehugger*, *damn hippie* and *bleeding heart*. The point I was getting at is that we have stereotypes about what treehuggers, damn hippies and bleeding hearts should look like. You should be allowed to be a modern city dweller and still care about the environment. (Cartwright, 2006)

Hill goes on to explain his view that, “if you have a choice, try to work with human nature and not against it . . . I want to capitalize on the way that our society seems to work, and make green, help green, profile green as this cool thing to help make it trendy and aspirational” (Cartwright, 2006).

The TreeHuggerTV episodes carry out this re-visualizing of environmentalists. *Vanity Fair* describes the site as “hip, not hippie” (“The E-Gitators,” 2006). As I discussed above, many videos feature urban spaces, and many of those in the urban spaces focus on style and design. For example, the episode, “THTV: Sustainable Style,” follows blogger Jill Danyelle as she goes shopping in Manhattan “looking for stylish sustainable clothes” (TreeHuggerTV, 2006h). Danyelle explains her motivation for emphasizing sustainable style: “I was getting tired that all the time when they talked about eco-fashion or whatever there was all these images of ‘crunchy’ . . . there’s a lot of options” (TreeHuggerTV, 2006h). The “news anchor” for TreeHuggerTV, Simran Sethi, further advances the visual of a modern TreeHugger environmentalist. As the face of TreeHuggerTV, Sethi, a young stylish woman of Punjabi descent who dresses in trendy casual clothes, embodies the re-visualization of a treehugger. Unlike stereotypical visions of crunchy, white males, Sethi provides a more inclusive vision of the possibilities for what an environmentalist can look like. Although the basic format of the TreeHuggerTV “news” episodes mimics the informative structure of standard broadcast news reports, the aesthetic of the news episodes and Sethi’s appearance on them more closely parallels light-hearted entertainment news shows that highlight fashion and style. Coming from an anchor position on MTV Asia, Sethi blends the style and sophistication from her appearances on MTV, Oprah, and Martha Stewart into a TreeHuggerTV persona (“The Messenger: Simran Sethi Multi-Media Environmental Correspondent,” 2007).

The final way that TreeHuggerTV works to re-visualize environmental activism involves the central role of consumption and the consumer. Almost all of the episodes feature sustainable products or alternative ways of consuming. This reliance on market-based solutions to environmental problems shares much in common with concepts like “natural capitalism” and “cradle to cradle design,” which emphasize the potential for sustainable capitalist relations (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999; McDonough & Braungart, 2002). Although harnessing the logic of capitalism and consumption to advance environmental initiatives is not a new approach, environmentalism is still often pitted against consumption in the public consciousness. Upon initial investigation, TreeHuggerTV’s presentation of environmentalism in

terms of green consumption seems to fall prey to the problem of commodifying and valuing the environment only in terms of its use-value. As such, TreeHuggerTV could be read as discouraging environmental activism by positioning viewers as passive consumers rather than as environmental activists. However, given the re-visualization of the environment as inhabited and environmentalists as “modern urbanites,” re-visualizing consumption as environmentalism creates an entrance to an accessible form of environmental activism: green consumption.

By presenting green consumption as environmental activism, TreeHuggerTV speaks to its viewers not as radical political protestors, but rather as the consumers the television format calls them to be. Even though TreeHuggerTV is a part of a television medium in transition, it is still a commercial consumer-oriented medium. As Hill recognizes, the role for online video is “*in combination* with advertising” (Cartwright, 2006, emphasis mine). TreeHuggerTV takes the consumption pattern of environmental representation found on television and uses it in a productive way. The episodes promote consumption, but it is a modified consumption, an “environmentally responsible” consumption. The convergence of media forms facilitates a seamless transition from watching an episode about sustainable consumption to browsing an Internet site where viewers can purchase their green furniture. The entwining of the episodes with other facets of the Internet reduces the amount of effort required to engage in green consumption. By informing viewers of greener and more sustainable ways to consume products they already use, TreeHuggerTV makes a consumer variation of environmental activism accessible to its post-network consumer viewers.

As part of the consumer-oriented approach, TreeHuggerTV offers an alternative to negative, apocalyptic versions of environmental activism. Like natural capitalism, which is “about choices we can make that can start to tip economic and social outcomes in positive directions,” TreeHuggerTV maintains an upbeat approach that empowers viewers (Hawken *et al.*, 1999, p. 322). Hill describes his goals for TreeHugger in these terms:

I’m hoping the takeaway on this site is positive . . . A lot of environmentalism has been doom and gloom, negative, inspired by fear. We are trying to be positive: 80% of the stuff we feature are solutions and good news. I try to make it really inspiring so a lot of people come away hopeful. (Cartwright, 2006)

Rather than focusing on negative views and the overwhelming “big” environmental issues, the online videos present consumer choices as positive and ordinary ways to achieve environmental change. In contrast to the apocalyptic rhetoric used historically by prominent environmentalists such as Rachel Carson that “attack[s] . . . developmentalists in industry and agriculture and the developmentalist mentality that has predominated among the liberal public,” TreeHuggerTV works to incorporate environmental concerns within developmentalist values, leveraging the widespread phenomenon of consumerism to expand environmental awareness (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992, p. 66).

## Conclusion

This analysis of TreeHuggerTV highlights a number of possibilities and limitations of environmental activism in the post-network era. We may find hope in the possibility for the proliferation of media outlets to provide opportunities to include in the public sphere formerly excluded perspectives and voices. As the work of Everett and Ovalle suggests, projects like TreeHuggerTV have the potential to rupture previous containments and exclusions of environmentalist perspectives. In answer to the critiques of more traditional television coverage, the episodes of TreeHuggerTV show the environment as the place where people live, include images that challenge environmentalist stereotypes, and feature green consumption as a powerful form of environmental activism. However, even as different environmentalist perspectives become available through TreeHuggerTV, they are less likely to reach mass audiences due to audience fragmentation in the post-network era. While some media consumers may have easily adjusted to watching “television” on a computer or iPod screen, others may not have made the shift. This means that in addition to the audience fragmentation already caused by the expansion from network to cable channels, TreeHuggerTV’s potential audience is further narrowed by its location online. As such, the episodes more likely reach not a wide sampling of the “mainstream,” but rather a narrow segment of technologically savvy, design-conscious, and environmentally aware consumers.

In addition to the limited audience, TreeHuggerTV may also fall short of solving long-term environmental problems due to its reliance on the consumer form. Although TreeHuggerTV’s approach can potentially attract larger numbers of activists by speaking to what is arguably the only remaining “mainstream”—the consumer—critics might say that this approach to environmentalism can still only engage activists as consumers. As such, these individualistic solutions provide an approach to environmentalism, but it is an incremental approach that fails to challenge larger systems. The nature of many large-scale environmental problems may require not only incremental, individual engagements but also more radical, collective approaches to change. A number of rhetorical analyses have previously recognized a range of approaches to environmental activism (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992; Spangle & Knapp, 1996). In Spangle and Knapp’s (1996) analysis of the persuasive appeals of environmental discourse, they recognize the potential for relations and overlaps between the perspectives of radical functionalists, resource functionalists and environmentalists, and radical environmentalists. Viewing TreeHuggerTV amidst a spectrum of environmental activism highlights the role these online videos may play in broadening the possibilities for action. In contrast to radical and apocalyptic modes of environmentalism based on fear appeals, TreeHuggerTV offers a vision of environmentalists who eschew the crunchy treehugger reputation, focus on the positive, and use consumption as their tool of activism.

Recognizing the limitations, but not wanting to dismiss the productive possibilities, I conclude that TreeHuggerTV offers an important supplement to other forms of environmental activism. The post-network form of TreeHuggerTV supports the

idea that it operates as a supplement to other more traditional forms of environmental media since the fragmented viewing audience limits the reach of the episodes. Like post-network television, which “leans heavily on ‘television,’ the medium as it once was known and experienced,” TreeHuggerTV relies on other versions of environmental activism (Newcomb, 2007b, p. 567). As such, it operates as a supplement rather than a replacement. Although the post-network form may limit the scope of TreeHuggerTV’s impact, it also provides the space for an opening up of environmentalism. Instead of condemning the site for failing to fill the role of an all-encompassing form of activism for all viewers, I suggest that we should recognize TreeHuggerTV for what it is—a program that may reach out to encourage a niche audience of design-savvy urban consumers to make more environmentally responsible consumption choices. By using consumption as an entrance to environmental change, TreeHuggerTV speaks not only to the already-committed environmentalist, but also to consumers who are concerned about their personal health, happiness, and style, and who are open to experimentation. By re-visualizing environmental activism in this way, TreeHuggerTV may incrementally broaden the activist base supportive of a more sustainable approach to living.

## Notes

- [1] TreeHuggerTV stopped airing new episodes at the beginning of 2007 when it launched the “Convenient Truths” video contest. In a personal communication with TreeHuggerTV staff, Ken Rother indicated a shift in focus toward the “radio/audio segments” and expressed uncertainty about the development of new TreeHuggerTV episodes (Rother, 2007). In February 2008, Tree HuggerTV began airing new episodes again.
- [2] Only two episodes stand out against this trend: the 3 April 2006 episode, “THTV: The Florida Everglades: How to Reclaim the Water Flow,” and the 13 December 2006 episode, “Freshtopia Takes the Long Train.” The Everglades episode is unusual in its attention to nature as isolated from people, featuring video of expanses of unpopulated land and close-ups of plants and animals of the Everglades. The Freshtopia episode advocates cross-country travel by train and features images of “untouched” wilderness views from the train, as well as industrial scenes the train travels through. The contrast between these episodes and most of the others highlights the characterization of the environment that TreeHuggerTV advances—the environment where people live (TreeHuggerTV, 2006b, c).

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