Media Education and Ecological Modernism: Embodiment, Technology and Citizenship

Carl Bybee, University of Oregon, bybee@uoregon.edu
Shelby Stanovsek, University of Oregon, sstanov2@uoregon.edu

Abstract: The field of media education, emerging within the instrumental vision of modernity, has largely ignored its unspoken modernist assumptions. In this article, we argue the time has come to fully engage an embodied view of media from an evolutionary, ecological perspective—what we might call *ecological modernism.* This is a perspective that views media as evolving mediations through various material/technical practices, where body knowledge, rather than some idea of objective reality, is understood as the empirical ground for how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world. The focus is then shifted from the problem of subject versus object relationships to how subjects and objects are mutually constitutive. By extension, the juxtaposition of the concept of citizen with the body clarifies yet another crucial dimension of the embodied perspective. Two examples of "citizen"-based media education projects are briefly reviewed from this ecological modernist perspective in order to consider the implications of resituating grounded citizen-oriented media education.

Keywords: media education, technology, sustainability, ecology, citizenship, modernism, body, embodiment

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Carl Bybee is an associate professor of Media Studies in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon and Director of the Oregon Media Literacy Project. His research and teaching draw on American Pragmatism to focus on understanding media and media activism through the lens of an integrated understanding of biological and cultural evolution, embodiment and democratic culture.

Shelby Stanovsek holds a Masters Degree in Media Studies from the University of Oregon and works in web design and management in San Francisco. Her research and writing interests focus on the intersection of media education and media technologies, emphasizing digital ethics and life skills in cultivating digital mindfulness.

Introduction

The multiple political challenges of global capitalism heighten the efforts of many media education programs to bring the political to the center of their work. Additional global challenges include: economic inequality, environmental crises, the rise of fundamentalist religious insurgencies and populist movements, the crisis of knowledge authority, and the proliferation of information network systems. As a result of this rising complexity, there has been a renewed interest in developing an organizing frame of reference which recognizes the complexity and interrelations of current political challenges, without seeking to return to a single totalizing explanation of these challenges. We argue that this objective can be advanced by reimagining our modernist frame of reference from an embodied perspective.

Media education, emerging within the instrumental vision of modernity in media studies, has for the most part failed to confront its unspoken modernist assumptions. Three of the most crucial assumptions noted by Bruno Latour are: (1) knowledge is discovered in the fragmentation of things, (2) the deep belief that the world can be divided into the living and the non-living, and (3) the related postulate that humans are separated from nature (Latour, 1993). This instrumental vision of modernity has allowed us to "knowingly," in an objectivist sense, celebrate the information/digital age without really paying all that much attention to what "technology" is, or without questioning the role played by communication in the work of what we might call ecological "knowing"--- that is, situating knowing as an active process growing out of human-to-human interaction in reference to a continuously changing environment. This instrumental vision of modernity has allowed us to view technology as a collection of things that stand apart from humans and the environment. It has also allowed us to view humans as standing apart from both technology and nature. Additionally, it has permitted us to be captivated by the spectacle of communication machines, while concealing the relationships between these machines, technologies, our bodies, and the rest of the living world. These are crucial issues, not just for media studies, but for how media studies inform media education.

Certainly, there have been critical efforts to rethink media studies and its relationship to technology, ranging from the Frankfurt School's concept of instrumental rationality, to the McLuhanesque Toronto School's "extensions of man," to Friedrich Kittler's technological determinism, to Bernard Stiegler's technics. However, for the most part, these efforts have ignored or failed to fully engage an embodied view of media education from an evolutionary ecological perspective–a perspective that views media as evolving mediations between the body and the biological and cultural environment.

An embodied view of media studies is crucial: in addition to providing a way to see a deep connection between the discipline and the planet, it also provides us with a new means for understanding *what is called* the empirical/material. This allows for the re-conceptualization of our relationship to technology, the environment, and the experiential quality of human flourishing.

This paper is informed by Bruno Latour's science and technology studies and John Dewey's view of embodied cognition as well as philosophies of technologies and aesthetics and varying conceptions of citizenship. It explores how media education can be reimagined to provide a framework for critical analysis as well as moral action for students and citizens alike in

a world marked by proliferating yet misunderstood interactions between technological, economic, ecological, and cultural networks. Further, it points to a collection of promising grounded efforts for an emerging media education for a living world that can be a basis for ecomedia literacy. To illustrate how this is possible, we apply the philosophical framework of ecological modernism to two different citizen-oriented media education programs run by Common Sense Media and Project Zero.

The Embodied Perspective

Our basic argument is that the framing narrative of instrumental modernism can be challenged with an ecological modernism paradigm, one which focuses on the integral relationship between living organisms and a living planet, and one that understands our humanness and our culture as the emergent achievement of bodies living in relationships with their environment.

One means to achieve this is to shift away from what we would call the disembodied perspective of instrumental/mechanistic modernism. This perspective encourages us to see the world from the objectivist perspective of nowhere, where science is narrowly understood as a kind of knowing that is concerned with a pre-existing hard reality, which leaves the "messy" problems of human experience as belonging to a *non-empirical*, separate world of feeling, values and qualities. The shift we are proposing is to understand these two views, the world of things and the world of feelings and values, not as separate but as interpenetrated. It is a shift to the perspective of people living in fleshy bodies, with sensations, feelings and emotions, who depend on one another as well as the living world. Knowledge grows out of these fleshy experiences: a view of knowledge-making that has increasingly been called an embodied perspective (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

This embodied perspective can be seen as an epistemological shift which grounds knowing in bodily experience rather than merely in some floating, linguistically constructed world, or some "out-there," "objective" reality. It breaks down the body-mind dualism of reductionist empiricism and opens the door to understanding "knowing" as an integration of environmental, biological, cognitive, and social experience and qualities.

If this sounds as if we are proposing a re-encounter with phenomenology, that is because we are. In what we might call the "new phenomenology," we are seeing a re-engagement with the primacy of experience of bodies. And instead of the new phenomenology making some claim for the superiority of the disembodied mind as a means to make sense of our living experience in the world, we see instead a movement to put biology and cognition back together again in terms of embodied cognition. We can see this in the work of American Pragmatism with William James's radical empiricism and Dewey's immediate empiricism, and in the re-encounter with early phenomenologists like Husserl and second-generation phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty. Today, works such as Mark Johnson's *The Meaning of the Body* (2008) and Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness* (2008) are crucial efforts mapping out this new terrain.

At the same time, and in a related development, the new phenomenology is also placing the experience of the body back into a relationship with nature (Bannon, 2016; Sallis, 2016). In our view, the task of connecting the world of media education to the living world cannot be

undertaken by merely invoking abstract conceptual ideas. The task, in our view, must be a fully empirical account of meaning-making/value-making based on body/environment transactions, transaction in Dewey's full sense of the interpenetration of subject and object. This is not to be empirical in the objectivist sense of belief in a pre-existing reality, but empirical in its most radical, Jamesian sense, that is, based on the constantly emerging and changing qualities of human experience (Cotkin, 1985).

The Turn to the Body and Ecological Modernism

We believe that the turn to the body, to embodied cognition, enables us to access what Johnson calls the aesthetics of human meaning (Johnson, 2007). This is a way of making sense of the world which recognizes and values the feeling qualities of human experiences at the core of the act of knowing. As Johnson writes, people want their lives to be meaningful, but unless feeling is taken as a central quality of meaning, we are left with mechanical descriptions of the world and our place in it. This leads to the mechanical construction of institutions and cultural forms as well as our relations to the environment. This, in turn, leaves many of us feeling as if we are aliens or strangers in our own world.

The turn to the body gives us access to and emphasizes at least four dimensions of sense-making: (1) experience, (2) qualities, (3) the relational sense of meaning through communication, and (4) an understanding of morality as an emergent guide to action.
The turn to experience over materiality helps us ground our understanding of knowing in our felt relationship to the living world. The turn to qualities recognizes that what we value in the world is our felt sense of the world, and that felt sense inevitably runs through all of our sense-making, including what has been called abstract mind and abstract thought. This doesn't deny the value of abstraction, but does reject the belief that abstraction has nothing to do with our bodies and their interactions with the world. It argues for an understanding of abstraction as a meaning-making act which grows out of experience and achieves its value by returning to experience to test its usefulness in guiding future action. This is the heart of the American Pragmatist view.

The turn to meaning as emergent through relationships offers up a richer way to understand and value how we come into our sense of humanness through an increased awareness of our interdependence with each other and the living world. Essentially, it states: no relationships, no meaning. It also directs our attention to the material and profound work of communication as the *means* for growing awareness of this interdependence and the *means* for action guided by what we are able to achieve in shared understanding of and reflection on our encounters with each other and the world. The relational quality of meaning also offers up a different way of understanding individual/society and human/nature relationships. In both cases, the trap of dualism, with its endless debates concerning the individual versus society and humans versus nature, is avoided. Instead, we are offered a way of understanding the uniqueness of our capacities as individuals, not as separate or opposed to society or nature, but as made possible by those relationships. We exist as conscious beings only in relationships.

Finally, in this view, as Johnson (2015) puts it, "moral deliberation is a process of interwoven imagination, emotion, and reasoning" (27). The feeling body, with a growing

capacity for reflection and imagination stimulated by relational knowledge situated in an interdependent human/nature environment, gives rise to the capacity for valuing, and valuing in such a way that preserves and enhances the capacity of the organism/environment to flourish.

In all of these senses, we can see the articulation of what we might call an *ecological modernism*, feet on the ground, toes in the dirt, and evolutionary.This is where to be human is to be of, for, and with the world. This is where to be human is the growing achievement of the means to conceptualize, experience, appreciate and nurture this interdependent/integral quality of living.

The Citizen and the Body

While the concept of citizen and citizenship has a rich and varied history, in contemporary usages its dominant sense is that of abstract political and legal rights associated with legal membership to a nation state (Heater, 2008). While key debates continue around rights versus duties and political versus social citizenship, the sense of citizen as being the linguistic means for marking the identity of an individual as "place-based" has largely been lost or ignored (OED). It is this sense of the intertwinement of place/environment and being, that an embodied approach to modernism redirects our attention. Citizenship, shorn of a felt sense of place or citizenship, understood as merely individual legal rights, contributes to an idea and set of practices of citizenship more connected to an instrumental/technological view of modernity with its fragmenting tendencies and dualistic conceptions of individual/community, human/nature, and science/values. At the same time, clearly and crucially, an individualistic, rights-based understanding of citizen/human can have value and get moral work done. Consider the intersection of scholarship and practice around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the right to communicate (Montiel, 2012; Singh, 2016). This work has been valuable for deepening rights to freedom of expression, access to the means of communication, and the protection of privacy. At the same time, a focus on the concept of individual rights creates a confusing context for making sense of communication which is a quintessential relational activity. Furthermore, it decontextualizes rights and communication from place-based and relational experience. Our interest here is raising the question and engaging in some tentative exploration of what an embodied perspective on both media and citizenship would bring to work involved in media education generally, and media education specifically linked to citizenship.

What happens when we extend the discussion of media education to take into account not only the body in and of nature, but also to take into account efforts to mark the relationship between body and place--- a relationship revealed by a historical look at the received history of the meaning of citizen? What happens when we explore "citizen" as a means for marking a relationship between a body and a place, and particularly a place which has been brought into being through human association. This holds the potential to highlight the crucial importance of our humanness as a relational achievement – relational in the sense of the growth of the possibility of meaning through the association of bodies and of those bodies to a particular place/ environment. If this all sounds a bit like Vandana Shiva's *Earth Democracy* (2005), that's because it is. Shiva, an Indian scientist, eco-philosopher and eco-activist, has argued against the

fragmenting paradigm of techno-capitalism and for a scientific and spiritual recognition of the intertwinement of the earth's biodiversity and thriving human communities.

Technology, the Turn to the Body and Education 3.0

This is perhaps one of the greatest advantages of the turn to the body. Tools and technologies are no longer a collection of potentially overpowering machines to which we need to reconcile our fleshy lives. Rather, technologies are understood as a collection of means, given material embodiment, by which we have mediated our relationship to the world. They can be seen as material embodiments of human desires and interests—not always well-formed or well-articulated, or even well-understood, but means nevertheless, by which we have transacted our relationship to the environment and to one another. As Dewey (1981) puts it:

> Man's bias towards himself easily leads him to think of a tool solely in relation to himself, to his hand and eyes, but its primary relationship is toward other external things, as the hammer to the nail, and the plow to the soil. Only through this objective bond does it sustain relation to man himself and his activities. A tool denotes a perception and acknowledgment of sequential bonds in nature.

Tools and technologies are the endless couplings between us and the planet. Our work becomes directed toward understanding, evaluating and re-evaluating the ongoing and transformative consequences of these couplings. Only then can we begin to take responsibility for the values we as humans are bringing into this world, and act to bring into practice the values we as human communities see and choose which allow us to thrive in relationship to our place in the biosphere. In this view of tools and technologies, the falsely innocent illusion of the separation of subject and object vanishes.

This is the emergent, empirical/material view, radically grounded in experience, that guides Science and Technology Studies. Science and its application through technologies can no longer be regarded as a value-free enterprise, but rather we must recognize that values and cultural orientations lie at the heart of the mediations we choose to make. It is the reason Latour (2011) issues his injunction to "love your monsters," with its provocative subtitle, "why we must care for technologies as we do for our children." Separation is not an option. Taking the fullest responsibility for our creations and clarifying our intentions in their design become urgent tasks in the effort to, what Latour and Beck (2005) call, "modernize modernization." In our terms, the handwriting/human writing is on the wall/landscape. We must move from an instrumental to an ecological modernism. In this sense, the turn to the body puts our bodies back into relationship with the living world, and by extension redefines our identities as citizens, in unavoidable and inseparable relationship with our tools and technologies.

Just as we suggest moving to the radical empirical/material view of Science and Technology Studies and Deweyian embodiment, Frau-Meigs (2016) asserts that we need to move beyond the "Internet of Things," which consists of connecting operators, non-human agents and big data, to an "Internet of Citizens." Frau-Meigs attempts to reassert a human element into a discourse that has become increasingly divorced from the populations it is meant to serve,

advocating for a more "people-centered" model based on the notions of communication rights and the right to communicate. We argue that such a task can be substantially strengthened through our embodied approach to media studies.

For instance, In *Education 3.0 and Internet Governance: A New Global Alliance for Children and Young People's Sustainable Digital Development,* co-written with Hibbard, Frau-Meigs promotes Education 3.0 as a pedagogy for participation and "co-design" as collaborative problem solving, "buttressed on human rights and shared values" (2016). By advancing from Education 2.0--information and communication technologies as support tools-- to Education 3.0--where MIL (media and information literacy) and Internet governance are the new basics--children can be provided with the competencies for cooperation, creativity, and social innovation--- building blocks for a democratic culture. Further, such a project will also nurture their human rights and understanding of shared values, which, in turn, will help to build more inclusive societies. Frau-Meigs and Hibbard suggest that rather than being solely considered a vulnerable group that serve as the subjects for policy, children and young people's protection "needs to be coupled with their education as emerging citizens to ensure they develop a healthy and positive relationship regarding the Internet" (1). This will require a dialogue that would be in line with a Deweyan "responsible technology" in which solutions are consciously developed through reflection about the problematic situations that have arisen online and a richer sense of citizenship. Such a response can only be fully responsible, according to Dewey (1981), when the results, values and ends that arise out of such reflective engagements with technology by young people are brought back to situations/places from which they originated in order to ascertain whether they are appropriate. There are no steadfast rules for engagement with the Internet. There are emergent and situational understandings for action. The Internet itself is not a stable thing or technology; it is an unfolding, shifting technological mediation.

Rather than dealing with the Education 2.0 understanding of the Internet as a tool in and of itself, Education 3.0 deals with the Internet as an environment itself. This transition more succinctly aligns with an evolutionary ecological perspective that rejects the modernist assumptions that views humans as apart from both nature and technology. Frau-Meigs offers an ecological or biological perspective, positing the idea of social cognition of media, which suggests a connection between humans and media-as-cultural representations. In her work, however, this biological/ecological perspective is awkwardly coupled to a liberal, individual rights narrative. The embodied perspective offers the potential for a more integral argument and practice. In this understanding, media fulfill some "functions" and services according to "situations," which, we argue can be more fully understood when it is more aligned with a Deweyan notion of technology, the body and a richer view of citizenship. All knowing, all technology, all morality comes back to its local, human, relational scale and, as mentioned above, with a full recognition of technology not as "thing," but as always unfolding process coupling human bodies with the environment.

Applying the Embodied Perspective to Two Citizen-based Media Education Projects

In our conclusion, we would like to take a brief look through the lens of an embodied ecological modernism at two major organizations working to put together media education and citizenship: *Common Sense Media* and *Project Zero*.

First, we look at the U.S. non-profit organization *Common Sense Media,* with a mission of "helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology," which has a national reach, and is developing an education support project titled "Digital Citizenship." In what might be an embodied approach to media studies, technology and citizenship, it offers different ways for students, teachers and educational institutions to re-imagine media education's work of communication, place-making and communication in a democratic society.

As one of the major hubs of media literacy resources in North America, *Common Sense Media* is a political, educational, non-profit behemoth led by James Steyer, brother of billionaire Tom Steyer. It had earnings of over $6 million in 2015 from licensing fees it charged companies like AT&T, Comcast, and Discovery Education, as well as the ability to raise $20 million in donations for new initiatives from its supporters, including Tom Steyer. Its Board of Advisors includes leading figures from the political world, sports world, investments and banking, technology, medicine, and education. In addition, it has a significant lobbying presence across the states and in Washington, D.C.

It is doing good work in terms of advocating for student data privacy laws and providing conventional media literacy teaching resources to tens of thousands of teachers and 60,000 schools. At the same time, here are a few initial critical and hopefully productive observations that an embodied ecological modernist view would put on the table. First, *Common Sense Media* begins with the premise that technology is a value-neutral information delivery/learning system. Their goal is to get "higher quality" educational content and opportunities into the classroom through these technological "devices." What is missed from an embodied view is that technology and learning need to be grounded in rich, situated experience. To understand technology as mediations means to ask and to teach about the technologies we are surrounded by and the design history, economic history, and cultural history which have produced them. For example, are the value/cultural traces built into the design/invention of the Internet and its legacy of industrial/military/academic cooperative effort, driven by a world war, just surrendered to market? What about the design of a cell phone? How can the ecological consequences of extraction, production, distribution and disposal of these technologies be seen as completely off the agenda of this *Common Sense Media* when bodies and the environment are being transformed according to underexamined or unexamined beliefs and assumptions about our disconnection from each other and the living world?

In a similar fashion, the concept of learning in *Common Sense Media* is removed from its transactional connection to others and place. All knowledge, from an embodied perspective, is always social knowledge, knowledge generated through the active process of creating shared meaning to guide collective action in a changing world. Social knowledge is the achievement of our humanness through community. At the heart of all learning, social knowledge and moral action create a community aware of itself, with a deep and continually growing understanding and appreciation of its interconnections and interdependencies, and consequently mutual

responsibilities. In *Common Sense Media,* the organization appears to cling to a modernist liberal idea of democracy as a mechanism for managing political power by rational, informed citizens. This is why it does not appear reflective about the conflict between market-based solutions and the work needed to help a self-aware public come into existence, a public better able to act in its own interest. Meaningful democracy needs such a self-aware public, capable of realizing its own interests, capable of generating knowledge relevant to those interests, capable of acting on them and also capable of engaging in a truly public evaluation of the outcomes of action. The terms social justice, economic justice, and environmental justice appear in the margins of the site, but not as guiding principles to what media education is about.

Second, in a related sense, the concept of "citizenship" in the *Common Sense Media* Digital Citizenship initiative is focused on individual orientations to using pre-existing technologies in a civically responsible way. Consider the definition of digital citizenship offered as the guiding frame to this initiative in the report that serves as a background to the research driving the initiative: "Digital citizenship is the responsible use of technology to learn, create and participate" (James, Weinstein, & Mendoza, 2019). Citizenship is not about coming to awareness regarding the experience of using these technologies, it is not about viewing technologies as a range of alternative means with alternative consequences for engaging with others and the world, it is not about place, it is not about relationships, it is not about building collective power in the interest of finding and clarifying collective values or collective self-determination. It is about a re-instantiation of a traditional liberal individual rights and responsibilities perspective and a standard modernist dualism separating humans and technology, subjects and objects. To *Common Sense Media*, there is no nature of which we are a part.

At the same time, there are some promising dimensions to the Digital Citizenship initiative, and particularly to its newly revised design. There are efforts to direct students to attend to feelings and emotions, most typically connected to content, but which could also be extended to the technologies themselves, and there is some attention to the concept of "humane design," which could be amplified and connected to the feeling quality of technology use and the imagination of alternative designs or even the "technologies" of solitude and reflection as a means for self-orientation. In this way, their approach, focusing on "slow down, pause, and think," could be fruitfully connected and strengthened by expanding on an embodied approach. On the citizenship side, while the new version of the initiative moves toward considerations of "civic dilemmas," it could directly engage the relational work of community- building and relationally and environmentally aware placemaking.

The second example of a media education project focused on citizenship we would like to briefly consider is the "Children are Citizens" project, developed by *Project Zero*, through Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. It is interesting to note that *Common Sense Media* partnered with *Project Zero* to produce the background research report for their revision of the Digital Citizenship initiative. Still, one can see some rather dramatic differences in approaches between *Common Sense Media* Digital Citizenship and *Project Zero's* direct approach to citizenship.

Project Zero itself was founded by Harvard philosopher Nelson Goodman in 1967 with the mission "to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity for individuals and groups in the arts and other disciplines."[1] Founded with the expressed interest in "understanding

learning in and through the arts," it is not surprising that foregrounding experience and expression as central means of understanding has run through its ever-expanding and interdisciplinary program of examining "fundamental questions of human expression and development." In this sense, it provides a dramatic contrast to the technology-centered approach of *Common Sense Media*.

The "Children are Citizens" project grew out of the belief that "children are not just future citizens but are citizens of the city in the here and now, with the right to express their opinions and participate in the civic and cultural life of Washington, D.C."(Project Zero, 2019). Through this project, educators across the city gathered to develop and implement a compelling curriculum that connects children with their city, helping them to discover and research places that interest them, while introducing new ways to support students' inquiry into their city, their place. In this program, which we see as implicitly encouraging an embodied approach to a richer sense of citizenship through ecological modernism, students developed a connection to nature and place and each other through their experiences---exploring "the Metro, monuments, museums, Union Station, natural spaces, public sculptures and playgrounds." They then symbolically engaged with these experiences when they "talked, wrote, drew, played, improvised, created three-dimensional; models about their ideas, and shared through views with their neighborhoods and schools."

We see this approach to intersecting media education and citizenship with embodiment to be extremely promising, given the prominence placed on grounded experience. Citizenship becomes a richer relational concept, and the next steps to connecting with issues like social and environmental justice more clearly. Drawing on an embodied perspective of technology could strengthen this already rich and imaginative investigation of spaces and places as technologies of mediation which carry and teach particular human values while valuing our interconnections to the environment.

Overall, we believe an embodied approach provides the ground--actually recognizes the ground we stand on--to contribute to an ecological modernism which can help us keep putting the world together instead of relentlessly taking it apart.

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