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## Greening media studies – An interview with Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller

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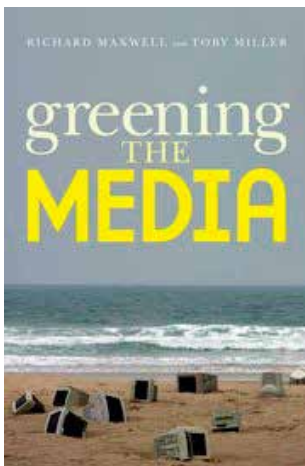
## Interview

### Greening media studies

*An interview with Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller*

Jaap Kooijman

Not often does reading an academic book make you feel uncomfortable, pushing you out of your comfort zone as a scholar and consumer. *Greening the Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) by Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller is such a book – an ‘inconvenient truth’ that forces one to realise that our media consumption comes at a price. Backed by revealing data Maxwell and Miller show how our media culture of flat-screen televisions, iPads, and smartphones has a destructive impact on the ecology, the global energy supply, and the working conditions of laborers in low-wage countries.



In the book's introduction the authors explicitly address how the discipline of media studies fails to critically evaluate this destructive impact. As the authors state, 'media students and professors generally arrive at, inhabit, and depart

universities with a focus on textuality, technology, and/or reception; they rarely address where texts and technologies come from or end up' (p. 10). The specific role of the discipline of media studies is the topic of this interview conducted through email. Conforming to the way they wrote the book Maxwell and Miller decided to answer the questions collaboratively.

**Kooijman:** You make a very convincing argument that media studies have neglected the materiality of the media. However, by describing the current state of media studies as dominated by 'a cult of humanism' as well as 'a cult of scientism' (p. 11), focused on either the empowerment of users and questions of representation or the role of technology, what do you suggest about the current research being done? Is your book meant as a wake-up call? Have we been neglecting a significant area of studies or have we been questioning the wrong issues in the first place?

**Maxwell & Miller:** Inviting [the discipline of] media studies to wake up to the ecological crisis was certainly part of our project. The difficulty lies in transforming that awareness into a comprehensive change in the field. First, the way media scholars hold certain theories and methods dear to their institutional identities makes a critique such as ours appear as just another attempt by a new kid on the block to gain attention. 'Sure, the environment is important, just like what we already do...'. But we think the eco-crisis is serious enough to challenge one very fundamental notion in media studies: that media technology is primarily a social (read economic, political, cultural) and psychological force. We argue that media tech is also an environmental and biophysical force. That's a game changer in our view. The second problem, which we share with most media scholars, is a fascination with media technology and what it can do. This can be a hindrance to the challenges posed by green techno-criticism, in particular questions about sustainability – how much media technology do we need, what are sustainable levels of energy consumption to power them, what are the costs of green design, and how will society bear those costs? Technophilia is not interested in how to provide 'just enough' media, or low-wattage entertainment, or higher-cost green tech, and so on. Up to now when the humanistic side of media studies has turned its attention to the environment it has responded to the crisis by conducting textual analyses of how ecological questions are represented in films or television, while the science side has focused on environmental communication or how effectively information is expressed to the public. There has been almost no consideration of these issues in a reflexive way that takes account of environmental destruction as a constitutive component of the media which lays waste (pardon the pun) to the beloved objects of study we all supposedly cherish.

**Kooijman:** You write that '[c]ollaborative scholarship is mostly frowned upon – or at least not understood – beyond the sciences. A commitment to the single-authored monograph's aesthetic-monastic model of knowledge entrenches such backwardness' (p. 20). Collaborative scholarship as you propose consists of scholars in media studies working together with scientists, political activists, policymakers, artists, etc. What is the specific contribution media scholars in the humanities can/should make within such a collaborative effort? What does this imply for the humanities in general?

**Maxwell & Miller:** There is a lot of talk about the digital humanities – which in most versions is rehashed McLuhanism, the sort that gets you back to media as a social force: the power of computerising lit crit, language study, cliometrics, and MOOCs. One quite different area that might find arts, humanities, and science working to further green activism and policy is in data visualisation. Epidemiological, demographic, scientific, and economic data sets are understood within their disciplines but mostly inaccessible or incomprehensible to non-specialists. Visualisation – graphic arts, animation, and so on – can make large data sets understandable, even enjoyable. Who doesn't love a good television show on abstract physics?<sup>1</sup> The Story of Stuff<sup>2</sup> uses simple animation to explain the life cycle of products and their environmental and health impacts. Infographics can render complex and abstract economic data into clear snapshots. There are still problems with some of the work being done – complexity and scientific uncertainty can be represented simplistically or misleadingly, while the environmental impact of visualisation technologies themselves has yet to be assessed. Investing in these kinds of collaboration, and giving the eco-crisis top priority, could help bring about sound environmental policy and regulation. In addition humanities faculty can work with scholars in related fields who have interests in the media, from environmental studies to sociology. We need work teams that teach and research based not just on adherence to a discipline but on the problems and delights posed by today's, yesterday's, and tomorrow's forms of everyday life – whether those be the law of Internet porn or the electronic waste of discarded cell phones. Nautilus<sup>3</sup> is a model.

**Kooijman:** Collaborative scholarship in the sciences is generally quite different than the broad alliances you propose (namely, far less interdisciplinary). Currently, due to institutional and financial pressures, the humanities are increasingly organised after the model of the sciences. I tend to see this as a negative development as the emphasis tends to be on increasing output and (economic) valorisation rather than on groundbreaking (and political activist) scholarship. In the humanities the monograph has already lost its dominance, replaced by a pressure to publish (both single and co-authored) articles in 'top-notch' journals.

From the perspective of greening media studies is this movement towards the science model counterproductive?

**Maxwell & Miller:** You raise some interesting points. The fundamental problem is when commodification and governmentalisation rather than social movements and peer review animate our work. It is interesting to see that the American Society for Cell Biology recently released its San Francisco Statement on these matters.<sup>4</sup> It stresses the following:

- the need to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations;
- the need to assess research on its own merits rather than on the basis of the journal in which the research is published;
- the need to capitalise on the opportunities provided by online publication (such as relaxing unnecessary limits on the number of words, figures, and references in articles, and exploring new indicators of significance and impact).

This is supported by editorials in all the ‘top’ science journals and by scholars worldwide. In addition it is scientists who have repeatedly argued collectively against, for example, undertaking peer review for journals owned by exploitative corporations; it is mathematicians who have been sued repeatedly by those corporations for exposing their price-gouging; and, finally, scientists are no longer as far from us as was once the case – the old divisions are rapidly breaking down in fields such as electronic gaming. Scientists are always creating new interdisciplinary formations. New projects such as Nautilus embody this tendency.

**Kooijman:** One of those eye-opening details in your book is when you write about online academic journals versus old school printed journals. As you rightly point out most of us will print online articles rather than sharing one hard copy with several scholars in the library. What practical suggestions can you give to an open access academic journal like *NECSUS* in being as green as possible?

**Maxwell & Miller:** It is essential to understand the life cycle of the journal, tracking all its inputs and outputs and the environmental and occupational harm they may cause. Then we can take apart that process and look for ways to replace materials with greener components; reduce electricity consumption from utility provider to work spaces; ensure healthy work spaces; follow the three Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle); inform readers about the environmental costs of printing versus reading online, and so on. The debate over the carbon impact of print versus electronic publishing is not conclusive at this stage and the best thing we can do is insist that all academic publishing undertake and disclose a life cycle audit of its footprint, from production to consumption, via the latest norms available. This is

especially important in the case of journals produced by professional associations, as they are underwritten by members, frequently involuntarily.

**Kooijman:** In a recent review of your book Phil Shannon concludes that it provides a 'sharp diagnosis' but 'weak solutions'.<sup>5</sup> One point of criticism is that your argument is 'not helped in its persuasiveness by an overdose of academic "media studies" theory'. Although I do not agree in this particular case (I found the book to be relatively accessible and jargon-free) such criticism is quite common for most academic work in media studies. How do you think media scholars should deal with this? How can we make our work more accessible to a larger audience without losing the nuances?

**Maxwell & Miller:** One of the things we did not want to do was lay out prescriptions – those goofy 'takeaways' of the self-help book industry that are minimally different each time while claiming maximal innovation and change.<sup>6</sup> Clearly much more research is needed along with more activism and policy work. Each of our chapters aims to offer a starting point, not a conclusive end to this research. Our hope was to offer a catalyst for greening the media, perhaps even an enticement to green the media studies curriculum, but not to write a revolutionary handbook, though maybe that could be our next project. We are media academics a good part of the work week and that kind of writing was bound to seep into our arguments, but we tried to corral most of it into the introduction after page 9. Interestingly, we found a course syllabus online that included *Greening the Media* and the instructor asked the students to read up to page 9 and skip the rest of the intro. That was our advice to readers who are not interested in our beloved jargon. In addition it is worth underscoring that we were writing, in part, a work of synthesis. It took us a decade to re-educate ourselves in various ways and the fields of knowledge we sought to comprehend were themselves developing and transmogrifying quite radically and rapidly during that period. Solutions are simply not obvious to a problem which itself is changing constantly.

**Kooijman:** Is a 'strong solution' possible? As undoubtedly many who have read your book, I (both as a consumer and as a media studies scholar) found myself in a bit of a Catch-22. A real solution would only be possible if we really break with our media consumption as well as our academic production. Is this too pessimistic?

**Maxwell & Miller:** It is an ethical and political problem. We media studies folks can only do so much, even if we adopt a strong solution in our personal and professional lives. This is a global problem that sits at the core of capitalist development – not just in Western Europe and North America but in the rapidly industrialising regions of Asia and Latin America (disputes over international accords on climate change give an idea of the difficulty of the political problems

we face). The question, as always, is not about the kind of media we want but rather the kind of society we want. Can we transform the system from one built on values of growth, abundance, and consumerism to one based on sufficiency and sustainability? In addition, can the media's grand aesthetic and political claims to being sources of pleasure and of knowledge stand up to serious scrutiny of their indubitable costs? Our book shows that this is no longer something that can be understood with reference to audiences and consumers, whether in terms of interpretations of reactions, their willfulness or comeliness, their vulnerability or power. Because simply by consuming they are endangering the world they occupy.

## Notes

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/video/2011/mar/18/brian-cox-building-blocks-matter>
2. <http://storyofstuff.org/>
3. <http://nautil.us/>
4. <http://am.ascb.org/dora/>
5. <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/53890>
6. <http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/14/3/421.full.pdf+html>

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## About the author

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