

**Radical Optimism:  
Expanding Visions of Climate Politics in Alternative Media<sup>1</sup>**

Shane Gunster, Simon Fraser University

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The front pages of the newspaper might look like bad news, an ominous and intractable mess – storm clouds on the horizon, the four Horsemen at the gate – but the back pages and the margins are filled with solutions. Tools and technologies, organizations and ideas – everything we need to avoid catastrophe. And they lead to a better way of life.

- Chris Turner, *The Geography of Hope*.

**Climate politics, political agency and news media**

The intersection of climate change communication with the *politics* of climate change, as distinguished from the representation and communication of climate science, has begun to attract much greater attention from critical scholars and activists. One of the foremost North American experts in climate change communication, Susanne Moser, has recently called upon climate change communicators to “go beyond merely conveying climate change knowledge and more effectively encourage and enable individuals to take part in the societal transformation necessary to address climate change successfully” (2009: 284). Taking aim at what he perceives as the top-down, professionalized, marketing approach favoured by some advocacy groups and communication professionals, Robert Brulle argues for an activist reorientation of environmental communication away from identity campaigns in favour of a renewed focus upon civic engagement through building up “alternative field frames” which create “an alternative map of the social world around which individuals can collectively mobilize” (2010: 85). David Ockwell, Lorraine Whitmarsh and Saffron O’Neill likewise suggest that rather than promote individual behavioural change, climate change communication should focus upon stimulating social and political demand for climate regulation, motivating the public to exert direct pressure upon governments to enact more aggressive mitigation measures (2009: 320). As widespread criticism of the ‘information deficit’ approach to environmental communication suggests, simply providing more or better information about climate change (to counteract the effects of climate sceptics promoting doubts about the level of scientific consensus, for example) will not be enough to motivate political mobilization. Instead, we need to give far more attention to the specific ways in which different ways of communicating (or not communicating) about climate politics can either inspire or inhibit public engagement with climate change *as a political issue*.

As Anabela Carvalho persuasively argues, such engagement is invariably mediated by the

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representations of climate politics one finds in the news media. Media, she writes, are the main arenas for citizens' understanding of political struggles in our times .... In a media-saturated environment, perceptions of the distribution of power, of the role of individuals in democracy and of the effectiveness of civic action are a function of multiple discursive representations .... media(ted) discourses also influence people's view of their own position in the chessboard of politics and are also constitutive of the political self, cultivating dispositions to action or inaction (2010: 174).

Portraying climate politics and policies as the exclusive domain of national and global elites, for example, leaves little space for individuals to engage as anything but powerless, cynical and apathetic spectators. Conversely, descriptions which emphasize the potential for citizens to actively shape climate policies through participation in the political process and pressuring governments can foster much greater perceptions of political self-efficacy and, consequently, heightened levels of political engagement.

Beyond portraying the action (or inaction) of citizens in particular ways, the representation of government policies, programs and regulations are equally important in framing the efficacy and desirability of political activism: success stories about specific interventions which have spurred the development of renewable energy supplies or reduced greenhouse gas emissions are likely to strengthen a more general perception of *all* governments as, at minimum, hypothetically capable of effective action and thus worthwhile sites of political struggle and contestation. However the absence of such accounts, coupled with an excessive emphasis upon the failures of government can easily reinforce the opposite perspective, namely, the idea that governments are not only unwilling but, also, essentially incapable of taking meaningful action. Once government disappears as a site of (potential) political agency and individuals lose the belief that they (or those like them) could ever influence the conduct of political power, civic engagement – indeed, the very ideal and practice of democracy – can only ever appear as a pointless exercise in self-deception.

Carvalho goes on to identify a number of ways in which news media representations of climate politics likely serve to constrain dominant perceptions of political agency and efficacy (2010: 174-6). First, prevailing images of the public tend to represent citizens as passive, reactive and self-interested, and largely unwilling and incapable of entering into any deliberative engagement on matters of public interest. Second, news media often represent social movements and political protest in a one-dimensional and often hostile manner, portraying challenges to the status-quo as a threat to the lifestyles and values of the majority. Third, event driven coverage of climate change ensures that global summits and meetings receive the most attention, thereby locating climate politics beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. In my own work on regional Canadian media coverage of the 2009 Copenhagen summit (Gunster 2010), I likewise identified a tendency of commercial media to represent climate politics in a very narrow and highly constrained fashion as the purview of global elites and nation states whose only rational course of action was the pursuit of economic self-interest leading, necessarily, to a hopeless state of fundamentally intractable political gridlock.

Writing more broadly about how the public is presented in mainstream news discourse, Justin Lewis, Sanna Inthorn and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen observe that “there is a sense here that ordinary citizens are portrayed as almost childlike: they are seen to have moods, experiences and emotions, but they are rarely seen making forays into a deliberative public sphere” (2005: 35). For the most part, the work collected by Tammy Boyce and Justin Lewis in *Climate Change and the Media* (2009) offers a similarly bleak portrait: although reporting on climate science has significantly improved in terms of shifting away from the ‘false balancing’ of climate scientists with climate sceptics (also see Boykoff 2007), little conceptual or affective space exists in commercial media for the public to engage with climate politics in an active, deliberative and empowered fashion.

**Charting a different course? Alternative media, alternative politics?**

Not all media, however, suffer equally from such limits: my survey of regional Canadian media coverage of Copenhagen (Gunster 2010) identified fundamental differences between commercial/corporate media on the one hand and alternative/independent media on the other. In particular, the latter offered a much more diverse and optimistic vision of climate politics as a place in which broad civic engagement on climate change can challenge and overcome institutional inertia as well as model democratic and participatory approaches to the development of climate policy. Despite the obvious affinities between calls for increased political engagement on climate change and alternative media which furnish ideal sites to nurture and promote such engagement, such media have received virtually no sustained attention from scholars of climate change communication.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the priority for most researchers has been documenting the deficiencies and limitations of large, national mainstream media along with developing recommendations for improving environmental communication.

While such work has been extremely useful and influential, it is equally important to explore *existing* media institutions and practices which *are* communicating about climate change in a more effective and engaged manner. Just as success stories about (some) governments getting climate policy right can invigorate our sense of political efficacy, success stories about (some) media getting climate politics right can affirm our sense of how effective news media could be in motivating broader civic engagement with climate change. Identifying best media practices can also sharpen the critique of mainstream media insofar as it provides concrete evidence that a more radical approach to environmental journalism is not simply idealistic speculation but, rather, already being vigorously practiced. Finally, a better appreciation of the virtues of alternative media by climate change communicators and scholars can help avoid the ‘reinventing the wheel’ which often accompanies criticism of commercial media. Instead of pouring all of our conceptual and logistical resources into developing new institutions, venues and practices of climate change communication, it may be more effective to plug into existing media structures which resonate with many of the principles suggested by critical scholars and communication practitioners.

“Future research,” writes Carvalho, “should focus on the role of new and alternative media ... in the empowerment and performance of resistance in climate change-related movements. It should analyze the communicative spaces where new forms of political subjectivity may be developing. It should probe into new varieties of ‘collective political subjectivity’ which are likely to be multi-scalar and flexible” (2010: 176). Mindful of this need to broaden our approach to studying media and climate change, we undertook a systematic review of how independent, Vancouver-based Canadian independent media organizations – *The Georgia Straight* and *The Tyee* – covered the politics of climate change during 2009.

While media ownership in British Columbia is among the most concentrated in North America, the province also has a thriving alternative media sector. As Canada’s largest free alternative urban newspaper with both a weekly print edition and online content, *The Georgia Straight* offers readers a combination of independent news, opinion, lifestyle and entertainment features. As of September 2009, the print edition had a circulation of almost 120,000 and an average weekly readership of 804,000 as surveyed by Angus Reid/Vision Critical in November 2009 (Association of Alternative Newsweeklies 2010). For an independent weekly these figures compare quite favourably with the 2009 weekly

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<sup>2</sup> For a rare exception to this trend, see Antonio Lopez’s (2010) argument that local, organic media are much better situated than mass, industrial media to cultivate political engagement with climate change.

circulation for the city's two main commercial dailies which each averaged around 1,000,000 readers (Canadian Newspaper Association 2009). *The Tyee* describes itself as "Canada's leading independent online news magazine" and publishes news and opinion features, as well as an associated blog, *The Hook*, which are accessed by more than 150,000 readers per month (Magazine Association of B.C. 2009). Established in 2003, *The Tyee* has quickly become a fixture of both B.C. and Canadian political culture and an important new source of investigative journalism and political opinion. Both venues offer a critical perspective on local as well as national and international social, political and cultural issues, and both tend to prioritize coverage of environmental topics. As such these two organizations are ideal test cases through which to examine how alternative media engage with climate change.

B.C. alternative media are also an excellent choice for this research given the comparatively high profile which climate politics has had in the province. First, the provincial government led by Premier Gordon Campbell has been among the most active jurisdictions in North America in the area of climate policy over the last three years, mandating sharp reductions in regional emissions, implementing a broad-based carbon tax and encouraging private corporations to develop for-profit renewable energy projects. These and other (controversial) actions have attracted both strong praise and harsh criticism, ensuring that climate policies and politics receive a great deal of attention. Second, the city of Vancouver has likewise embraced the politics of climate change with Mayor Gregor Robertson identifying sustainability as one of his top priorities and building emissions reductions into a variety of initiatives around transportation, land use planning, waste management and building codes. Third and perhaps most important, the province is home to a wide range of environmental organizations and activist groups which seek to influence government action, shape public opinion and motivate citizen engagement with environmental issues using a variety of tactics from information and advocacy campaigns to civil disobedience. In short, environmental issues and activism loom large in the political landscape of the province, making it an excellent site in which to explore the potential for alternative media to cultivate an expanded field for climate politics.

We collected all items published by these two sources between January 1 and December 31, 2009 based on the keywords "climate change," "global warming," "greenhouse gas emissions," "CO2 [carbon dioxide] emissions," "carbon tax," and "Copenhagen". This search generated 216 pieces from *The Straight* and 145 from *The Tyee* for a total sample size of 361 items. All items were subject to a qualitative critical discourse analysis which identified dominant themes in the coverage with a particular emphasis upon how climate politics was represented. Two graduate research assistants also performed a quantitative coding of the characteristics of each item, including assessment of government performance on climate change, descriptions of different types of solutions to climate change and references to climate activism.<sup>3</sup> However, given the limits of quantitative analysis for exploring complex themes such as the representation of climate politics, statistical dissection of the sample played a relatively minor role in our analysis. Instead, our priority will be a discussion of how alternative media shaped the potential for civic engagement with climate change by framing climate politics in particular ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Data for this article is part of a larger study examining regional B.C. media coverage of climate change which has a total of 579 items. An inter-coder reliability test was conducted by two graduate student coders on a random selection of 80 items (14 percent of the total sample). The average rate of agreement for all variables was 92.9 percent and every variable, with one exception, had a rate of agreement of 80 percent or higher. The single variable which did not reach this threshold was that which measured the promotion and/or criticism of voluntary/lifestyle solutions: the level of agreement for it was 78 percent.

### Expanding the frame: Politicizing climate change

In mainstream news media, attention to the political dimensions of climate change tends to ebb and flow depending upon the presence of key focusing events such as international summits or, more rarely, the implementation of domestic policies. In the absence of such events, climate politics tends to play a minor, background role in news about other aspects of climate change. Stories about developments in climate science, for example, or the current/future impacts of climate change (e.g. extreme weather events) rarely frame these issues in terms of their relevance for climate politics. Coverage of the ‘green economy’ often fails to consider how the deployment of new technologies of energy and transportation might be enhanced as part of an integrated political response to climate change. Profiles of eco-friendly products or advice about how to reduce one’s carbon footprint through lifestyle change encourage people to conceptualize their own response to climate change in a fundamentally individualized and apolitical manner. When climate change does appear as a political issue, it is usually narrowly represented as the domain of national and international political elites, a rarefied space which citizens may passively (and cynically) observe, but which lies largely beyond their influence and control. Moreover, the tone of such coverage is often negative and pessimistic, presenting an image of climate politics as irredeemably flawed. For the most part, little positive attention is given to progressive forms of political action, whether in the form of policy-based solutions or democratic activism (Gunster 2010). As such, climate politics almost always appears as part of the problem and rarely as part of the solution.

In contrast, alternative media offer a much more expansive vision of climate politics which combines extensive investigation into the failures of existing political institutions with compelling and often inspirational accounts of how activist political engagement can transform those institutions into powerful and positive forces for change. During 2009, climate politics was clearly the dominant theme in alternative media coverage of climate change: 244 of 361 items (67 percent) possessed an explicitly political focus as compared to only 40 items (11 percent) dealing with climate science and only 29 items (8 percent) emphasizing voluntary, non-political actions by individuals and businesses. In both *The Straight* and *The Tye*, then, climate change was overwhelmingly framed as a *political* issue. Motivating local and national governments to adopt strong climate policies was consistently portrayed as the single most effective and, indeed, as the only realistic means to address climate change. As admirable as voluntary measures by individuals and businesses may be, they simply do not go far enough in securing the reductions in emissions levels which climate science has determined are necessary to avoid catastrophic levels of global warming. Although specific governments were often subject to harsh criticism, others were selectively praised for their adoption of particular policies and initiatives, demonstrating not only that government action can work but that it is actually working elsewhere. Profiling the differences between *existing* climate, energy, transportation, agriculture and urban planning policies can serve as a powerful antidote to an otherwise pervasive loss of faith in the efficacy of any and all forms of government intervention. Strategically assembling examples of practical and effective policies from other jurisdictions which can then be juxtaposed against the failure of one’s own government to take similar action can simultaneously invigorate public desire for more and better (rather than less) government and convince the public that engagement in the political process matters for the type, quality and accountability of the government they receive.

Before digging into the details about how climate politics was framed, it is worth noting that one of the most important contributions of alternative media to expanding the conceptual horizons in which we consider climate change was periodically stepping back from the immediacy of particular policies and events to provide a ‘big picture’ view of the broader questions posed by environmental crisis. Alternative media were especially keen to grapple with the deep structural changes which are required in

our economic and political practices as well as our moral and philosophical values in order to inaugurate and expand truly sustainable ways of life (Leiserowitz and Fernandez 2008). Both *The Straight* and *The Tye* regularly featured ‘big ideas’ pieces which tried to theorize some of the deeper issues raised by climate change. Many columns and op-eds, for example, presented thoughtful criticisms of the paradigm of economic growth, not only observing the fundamental incompatibility between endless industrial expansion and ecological health, but also raising serious doubts about the capacity of this paradigm to serve human needs. In a piece representative of this broader critical focus, University of Victoria environmental studies professor Michael M’Gonigle warned that ‘success’ in the Copenhagen negotiations would further entrench the structures which are responsible for climate change, provocatively describing economic growth as

the largest elephant in the room because the whole panoply of solutions on the table – cap and trade, carbon taxes, clean development mechanisms, carbon offsets – are all made to fit within capitalism and its growth imperative. But doing without growth is not something anyone is prepared to consider. Growth is the lifeblood of capitalism. We simply dare not, cannot, talk about it. (2009c)

For M’Gonigle (and others), the only real hope in genuinely confronting the growth fetish lay in a radical democratization of our economic system, dramatically expanding the political sphere in order to bring systems of production and consumption under popular control and regulation. “Actually empowering citizens to try out new things where they live entails a form of what Harvard law professor Roberto Unger calls ‘democratic experimentalism’. DemocracyNow! calls it ‘deep democracy’.” (2009b) Pieces such as these which used climate change as a platform to launch wide-ranging conversations about big ideas such as the need to confront dominant paradigms of economic growth and experiment with new forms of participatory democracy challenged readers to expand the conceptual horizons through which they understood and engaged with climate change as a political phenomenon.

### **Politics (still) matters: Seeking hope in dark times**

Given alternative media’s commitment to providing alternative and often oppositional perspectives on political issues and events, it comes as little surprise that their pages were filled with strong denunciations of the inaction, obfuscation and delay by governments. The most obvious example of this during 2009 was the uniformly critical coverage of the Canadian government: of the 22 percent of all items (80 out of 361) which contained an explicit assessment of Canada’s performance on climate change, virtually all of them (93 percent) offered an entirely negative appraisal. Among the most persistent critics was scientific icon and weekly *Straight* columnist David Suzuki who authored dozens of pieces which attacked the government’s weak environmental record. In his first column of 2009, for example, he lamented (prophetically, as it turned out) that Canada has “the dubious honour of winning the Colossal Fossil award (as well as 10 daily fossil awards) at the climate change talks [in Poland] for doing more than any other country to impede progress .... [and is] also ranked second-last out of 57 countries, just above Saudi Arabia on the international 2009 Climate Change Performance Index” (2009b). In January and February, Suzuki joined with others to criticize the federal budget which allocated significant public investment to research in carbon, capture and storage (CCS) while providing virtually no support for the development of renewable energy supplies (2009a). In May, Suzuki profiled a report by the Canadian environment and sustainable development commissioner which found the federal government guilty of overstating expected GHG reductions, unable to monitor actual reductions, lacking a coherent climate policy and thus unable to meet the country’s international obligations under the Kyoto protocol (2009f). In these and other columns, Suzuki was unsparing in his strong criticism of

the domestic inaction and global intransigence of the Harper Conservatives on climate change.

What was especially noteworthy about the strong criticism of Canada from Suzuki and others, though, was how often it was framed in *comparative* terms by contrasting domestic weaknesses with the much stronger commitments and actions by others. Criticism of political actors and institutions, in other words, was almost always specific rather than totalizing, and most stories about the failures of one government were balanced with favourable references to the achievements of others. During the first few months of 2009, the positive foil deployed against Canada was, more often than not, the incoming Obama administration which was held up by many as evidence of the potential for effective, progressive climate action *within* existing political institutions. Contrasting Obama's activist actions and intentions with both the reactionary intransigence of his predecessor as well as the resistance and lethargy of the Canadian government built upon broader narratives of hope and change which had taken shape around his presidential campaign. The underlying theme of such pieces was that *politics matters*, both in terms of setting (and changing) the policies, procedures and objectives for a wide range of influential public institutions and regulatory agencies as well as shaping the values and priorities for society at large. Praising Obama's inauguration speech for its commitment to restore science "to its rightful place", Suzuki noted that even more refreshing than the words themselves was the fact that "President Obama is backing those words with action. He has appointed top scientists to key positions, including Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu as energy secretary ... and Harvard physicist John Holdren as head of the White House Office of Science and Technology. These appointees understand and take seriously the science of climate change." (2009i)

Four months later, Suzuki again lauded Obama for "giving the American people hope that positive change is possible. If only we were being offered the same kind of hope here in Canada." Detailing these changes, Suzuki explained how the U.S. president "has injected billions of dollars into science .... signed into law protection for over two million acres of wilderness, and made clear his intention to combat climate change, including a willingness to force automakers to produce more fuel-efficient and less-polluting cars." (2009g) Beyond simply echoing the prevailing fascination with Obama's political charisma, stories like these made the case that electoral politics can and does matter in terms of concretely shaping environmental policy. At one level, this may seem like an uncontroversial and even banal claim. Yet it actually serves as an important counterpoint to an increasingly widespread and cynical pessimism which discounts *all* political institutions as equally ineffective and uninterested in tackling environmental crisis. It also reminds environmentally minded citizens that electoral campaigns are a critical venue through which to engage in climate politics.

References to Obama's commitments to provide regulatory, policy and financial support to the renewable energy sector were especially common, framed as evidence of how political leadership could marshal society's resources to address climate change. Criticism of the lack of federal engagement in this area (and the aforementioned choice to instead prioritize investment in CCS) was often paired with glowing reports about U.S. initiatives. In the lead up to the federal budget, for example, *The Tyee* profiled a call from Power-Up Canada (a renewable energy lobby group) for a Green Economy Action Fund, a five year plan for the federal government to provide over \$40 billion to retrofit buildings, finance the development of renewable energy, invest in transit, green-grid and other low-carbon infrastructure (Solomon 2009). The initiative was broadly supported by labour unions, environmental organizations and climate scientists. The plan was explicitly framed in *The Tyee* as a Canadian version of the green stimulus program being proposed south of the border and the news item spent as much time explaining the U.S. initiatives as it did on the Canadian proposal. As Tzeporah Berman, the organization's chief spokesperson put it, "Barack Obama is planning millions of green jobs, why should Canada be left behind?" (Cited in Solomon 2009) In an op-ed entitled "Obama's Challenge to Canada," University of

British Columbia (UBC) political science professor Michael Byers likewise warned that Canada risked falling behind other nations in the development of renewable energy technology and would, consequently, be missing out on the massive investment and employment opportunities such developments offered. Instead, he called for radical new thinking like “wind, solar, tidal and geothermal developments on a scale comparable to Germany or Denmark today, and the United States tomorrow” (2009). The accumulation of comparative references to progressive energy policies adopted elsewhere sharpened and broadened the indictment of Canadian inaction in this area, framing it as simultaneously environmentally irresponsible *and* economically short-sighted not to engage in the same kinds of policies as other jurisdictions were actively pursuing.

Much has been made of the importance of an emerging ‘green economy’ frame which can challenge the ‘jobs vs environment’ frame that has tended to dominate media coverage of environmental issues over the past several decades (Fletcher 2009; Zehr 2009). Environmental communications strategists are especially enamoured with the prospects for such a frame to bypass divisive (and often ideological) battles over climate change and, instead, cultivate bi-partisan consensus on so-called ‘win-win’ issues such as the economic and employment opportunities or increased energy security which will accrue to those nations which lead the way in revolutionizing the production and use of energy (e.g. ecoAmerica 2009; Futerra 2010). Stimulating public awareness and excitement about the possibilities for greening the economy is a crucial task in building public support for taking action on climate change. However, it is essential not to neglect the essential role that a hospitable legislative, regulatory and policy environment plays in facilitating the growth of such activity. If government is not actively cast as the midwife of this economic and technological transformation, that role will instead be filled by the free market and glowing reports about the achievements of green enterprises will be taken as evidence of the sufficiency of market-led corporate innovation in addressing environmental crisis.

Even worse, stories of the green economy may disappear into the business pages in which companies and technologies are assessed first and foremost as investment vehicles, and public policy (if it is mentioned at all) is measured according to its impact upon the bottom line.<sup>4</sup> Opportunities to weave enthusiasm for the green economy into broader narratives about social and economic justice, exploring employment opportunities for low-income and/or displaced workers which can mobilize diverse political constituencies in support of climate-related policies, are then easily displaced by neo-liberal fantasies of wide profit margins and national competitiveness. Whether the green economy is framed as an active political response to economic and ecological crisis or as emerging more or less directly from the entrepreneurial ingenuity of the private sector matters a great deal in terms of expanding or contracting the field for climate politics. Most importantly perhaps, the failure and/or refusal to constellate the green economy together with climate change (out of fear of rhetorically ‘contaminating’ the positive associations of the former with the negative associations of the latter) can accentuate the apocalyptic (and anti-political) framing of climate change as a problem without a solution.

Among the most distinctive characteristics of alternative media coverage was their efforts to bring

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<sup>4</sup> While news media coverage of climate change has received considerable scholarly attention, very little work has been done on the representation of energy issues and policies. In our own work on B.C. media, however, we discovered that many stories about the green economy and, in particular, renewable energy had to be excluded from our study of coverage of climate change because they did not contain any of our keywords such as “climate change”, “global warming,” “greenhouse gas emissions” or “carbon dioxide emissions”. This suggests that coverage of climate change and coverage of energy issues frequently occur in isolation from each other.

together discussions of energy and climate with a strong emphasis upon government policies, programs and regulations which framed the green economy as a political matter rather than solely an economic or business phenomenon. We coded for the presence of explicit, clear and normative arguments about three types of solutions to climate change: political (actions taken by government which are mandatory in nature), voluntary/lifestyle (voluntary actions undertaken by individuals or businesses) and technological (mandatory or voluntary actions which primarily focus upon the use/development of new technologies). Discussion of political solutions appeared in close to 60 percent of all items as compared to technological solutions in just over 25 percent and voluntary/lifestyle solutions in less than 20 percent of all items. To put this another way, political solutions appeared in over 80 percent of all items in which solutions were discussed, technological solutions in 36 percent and voluntary/lifestyle in 25 percent. Beyond the strong emphasis upon political solutions *per se*, these results also suggest that a political frame often dominated discussion of other types of solutions: over two-thirds of all items which referred to technological solutions, for example, *also* considered political solutions. In other words, the development of new technologies such as renewable energy was commonly framed as dependent upon regulatory, policy or funding initiatives from government.

Government *as catalyst* was a constant theme in both news and opinion pieces. In a guest op-ed, for example, Andrea Harden-Donahue from the Council of Canadians made a strong case for a national renewable energy strategy. Canada's current laissez-faire approach to the management and regulation of the energy sector, she explained, ran counter to the hands-on approach that many other nations had adopted. "Faced the reality of climate change and diminishing energy resources, most countries have recognized that the market alone cannot satisfy national energy requirements and have national energy strategies" (2009). In the same edition of *The Straight*, Suzuki likewise (re)presented energy as a political rather than primarily an economic or technological matter. "The current economic difficulties, a deepening ecological crisis, and energy problems provide an opportunity to radically reassess our current status and direction. Energy especially provides a chance to rethink our course." He went on to praise the Ontario provincial government's introduction of *The Green Energy Act* (including a feed-in tariff program to stimulate the development of local renewable energy sources and technology) as exemplary of such an enlightened approach.

Governments such as Germany's already have a considerable head start when it comes to renewable energy, and even the U.S. is becoming a world leader in clean-energy technology. It would be great if this latest move by the Ontario government encouraged other Canadian politicians to get in on the act – not just for the sake of clean land, air and water, but for the sake of keeping our economy strong as well (2009h).

An extensive range of domestic and international policies, programs and initiatives were discussed and promoted in op-eds from NGOs as well as in the substantial news coverage which alternative media provided to the green economy. From the potential development of tidal power in B.C.'s coastal waters (Paley 2009b) to the possibility of using turnover within Canada Post's immense fleet of vehicles to kick-start the production of electric cars and a network of charging stations (Loy 2009), the pages of *The Straight* and *The Tyee* were filled with innovative and detailed proposals to expand the scope and scale of the green economy. Irrespective of the particular merits or deficiencies of any given policy, the ubiquitous presence of solutions-based discourse grounded in government action, rather than initiatives voluntarily undertaken by well-meaning individuals and businesses.

In addition to the cluster of stories detailing initiatives in the area of green jobs and renewable energy, other items contained enthusiastic portrayals of the positive effects which public policies have had in a variety of related areas such as transportation, agriculture and urban planning. The cities of Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Portland, for example, were praised for their use of the tools of municipal

governance to develop and expand cycling infrastructure. In an excellent piece investigating what Vancouver might learn from Portland's success in transforming itself into a bike-friendly city, Christine McLaren cited Mia Birk, a leading expert in bicycle and pedestrian planning: "There's a myth that Portland is just a place where everybody bikes, that's just how it is .... The same myth exists for Copenhagen and Amsterdam and all the bike friendly cities of the world. 'That's just how it is, people just bike.' And that's not correct, the truth is that we made this city what it is today." (Cited in McLaren 2009) Arno Schortinghuis, president of the Vancouver Area Cycling Coalition, likewise observed that "in Copenhagen, decades of dedicated work by city council and staff has obtained a 40 percent cycling mode share. Even so, they still focus on improving cycling because they know that for every \$1 they invest in cycling, they save \$5 in other government services." (2009) In both of these pieces, criticism of Vancouver's relatively timid approach to cycling infrastructure and detailed proposals for more ambitious policies was grounded in evidence of how similar policies have succeeded in other jurisdictions. Whether it be creating a vibrant pedestrian zone in New York's Times Square by closing city streets to car traffic (Woodsworth 2009) or invigorating urban neighbourhoods through expansion of light rapid transit in Portland (Beers 2009a), stories of *political* success – that is, actions by government which have achieved concrete results in a particular area – can not only inspire calls for the emulation of those initiatives but, more broadly, enhance (or restore) the public's faith in government as an institution (and politics as a practice) which is capable of addressing environmental crisis and making real and often dramatic improvements in their lives. After three decades of continuous conservative and neo-liberal assaults on the very idea of government, such stories are essential in (re)building and expanding the political constituency for environmental public policy and convincing citizens that progressive political action is something worth fighting for.

In recent years it has become commonplace to attack the environmental movement for its tendency to rely upon an apocalyptic rhetoric which prioritizes terrifying accounts of the ecological nightmares we face rather than develop inspirational and inclusive visions of a sustainable future we all might share (e.g. Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2007; Turner 2007). Although references to the catastrophic potential impacts of climate change were a common feature of alternative media coverage, we found that the overall tone of both news and opinion pieces was generally optimistic and hopeful, balancing the need for urgent and immediate action with the confidence that real, practical solutions do exist. Very few stories were genuinely apocalyptic in the sense of presenting doomsday scenarios of catastrophic global warming as the inescapable fate of humanity. Instead, climate change was consistently described as a problem which lies within our collective power to solve. Especially noteworthy in this regard were those pieces which openly celebrated the utopian dimensions of sustainability as actually being practiced today: filled with positive affect, such stories invited readers to actively participate in imagining how (easily) a better world might be built. Through investigation into the policies and practices of sustainable energy, transportation, agriculture and urban design, *The Straight* and *The Tyee* provided their readers with a steady supply of broadly optimistic, solutions-oriented journalism.

It is worth briefly sampling from three feature articles published in July and August in *The Tyee* to get a better sense of the hopeful and enthusiastic tone woven into many of the pieces in alternative media. First, in a story about the completion of a solar energy project in a remote First Nations community, Colleen Kimmitt framed adoption of the new technology as "the beginning of a renaissance for First Nations; a way to reconnect with the land in a totally new way plus gain energy autonomy" by showing how democratizing the process of infrastructure renewal has helped the community to identify and realize broader goals of economic autonomy and self-sufficiency (2009b). The piece was filled with positive testimonials about how involving the entire community in planning, installing and maintaining the technology had given local residents a real sense of hope for the future. Second, McLaren leavened her

detailed investigation into the activist politics and policies which have made Portland into a (relative) haven for urban cycling with personal accounts of her experience biking in the city.

[A]s I cruise my way home from the Cirque-du-Cycling, pedaling over the wide neck of bikeway across Portland's Hawthorne Bridge, I am struck by how unusual it feels to be this comfortable and relaxed while riding urban streets. As a cyclist visitor in this way, I sense I've been granted ownership and equity in the road system that, after all, is there to get everyone where they want to go. Wouldn't it be great to feel that way on the streets back home, in Vancouver? (2009).

A third *Tyee* piece, part of a series supported by the magazine's innovative Fellowship for Solutions Oriented Journalism, waxed eloquently about the pleasures of local organic farming while simultaneously engaging in a policy-based discourse about how to improve the future prospects of urban agriculture. "The appeal of doing something, with your hands in the soil," David Tracey wrote, "offers anyone a chance to be in on the solution. You could wallow in the end of the world as we know it, or you could take an active role as an engaged citizen while you bite into a sun-warmed tomato fresh off the vine. Which side are you on?" (2009) In each of these pieces, the positive effects of sustainable energy, transportation and food policies were illustrated through stories about how they have improved the lives of real people. In a virtuous political circle, positive affect was represented as both cause and effect of a more participatory and democratic approach to policy-making: cycling or food activists, for example, struggle to create better conditions for biking or urban agriculture, ultimately attracting more people to the activity, generating more activists, which then leads to even better conditions for it and so on.

Neither a facile endorsement nor a cynical dismissal of lifestyle politics, alternative media frequently embedded consideration of climate-related policies within narrative accounts of how the implementation of those policies actually makes people feel, including the genuine experience of empowerment which accompanies participation in social change.

### Thinking globally, acting locally: Re-scaling climate politics

For many scholars of climate change communication, facilitating public engagement with climate change is best achieved at the local level, both in terms of building awareness about the local impacts of climate change as well as informing citizens about the possibilities for taking effective action at a local level (Leiserowitz 2005; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006; Segnit and Ereaut 2007). In their study of climate change discourse in the United Kingdom, Nat Segnit and Gill Ereaut celebrate the capacity of local frames "to make climate change, and solutions to it, real, *tangible*, in a way that is clearly far harder at the national and/or international level" (2007: 32). Writing more broadly about all forms of environmental politics, Christopher Rootes notes that "acting locally will not usually be enough to secure redress of environmental grievances but, for most people, local campaigns offer the only accessible entry to the political struggle for ecological sustainability" (2007: 739). Yet, as Carvalho points out, "sustained analysis of the possibilities for local policy-making on climate change features only rarely in mainstream media" (2010: 76). Instead, climate politics is usually represented as something which occurs behind closed doors in national and international fora, far removed from the influence of ordinary citizens.

*The Straight* and *The Tyee*, however, challenged this narrow framing of climate politics by exploring the multiple scales in which climate politics occurs, paying particular attention to the climate-related policies of the provincial government. Unlike coverage of federal climate policy and politics which was heavily clustered around Canada's disappointing performance during the Copenhagen summit, focus upon provincial policies and politics was more consistent through the year as alternative media featured a wide range of news and opinion analysing the actions of the B.C. government from a variety of

perspectives. A strikingly large proportion of items (122 of 361, or over one-third) *directly* engaged with the question of how well or poorly the provincial government was performing on the issue, thereby reinforcing the connection between climate change as a global environmental crisis and local political institutions as *the* most relevant sphere of action for those interested in the topic. Assessment of the B.C. government's performance was more balanced than the entirely negative reviews of the federal government given the more progressive approach to climate policy taken by British Columbia in some areas, especially his introduction of a carbon tax in 2008. Yet the majority of coverage adopted a critical tone: 18 items (5 percent) were favourable, 72 (59 percent) were unfavourable and 32 (26 percent) provided mixed reviews. Much less attention was given to assessing the municipal government's record with only 25 items (7 percent of the total sample) casting the City of Vancouver's climate change initiatives in either favourable (12 items), unfavourable (4 items) or mixed (9 items) terms. However, the critical role that cities in general can and must play in reducing emissions levels through initiatives in land use planning, building practices, waste management, mass transit and other areas received considerable attention in both *The Straight* and *The Tyee*.

The overarching theme woven through most of the coverage of provincial action on climate change was the rather stark contradiction between seemingly aggressive climate policies on the one hand and a variety of other initiatives resulting in increased provincial emissions on the other hand. As many pieces noted, the provincial Liberals deserved credit for actions such as introducing a carbon tax, legislating deep cuts in emissions by 2020 and 2050, joining the Western Climate Initiative and requiring all public sector operations to achieve carbon neutrality (through reductions and offsets) by 2010. At the same time, however, the province was also continuing to provide massive subsidies to the local oil and gas industry, spend billions on expanding highways as part of the Gateway infrastructure program and quietly support the construction of the Enbridge pipeline across northern British Columbia to enable direct export of oil from the tar sands to Asian markets. Inclusion of perspectives from environmental activists, social justice advocates and opposition politicians, both in the form of op-eds as well as sources within news items, provided the public with an ongoing accounting of provincial policies which was both detailed and holistic in nature, ensuring that the Liberal spotlighting of particular initiatives such as the carbon tax (for which Gordon Campbell received an award in Copenhagen) did not displace attention from how other provincial policies were actually contributing to increased emissions. In addition to leaving citizens better informed about the overall effect of provincial policies, this holistic approach can cultivate a more sophisticated understanding of how achieving real reductions in emission levels requires coordinated action across a broad variety of areas. Ultimately, though, the most important effect of this coverage may have simply been to hammer home the message again and again that the policies of the provincial government have an enormous impacts upon local emission levels and, accordingly, participation in provincial politics (either within the conventional political process through provincial political parties and election campaigns, or outside that process through activism targeted at the provincial government) provides an excellent opportunity for citizens to directly participate in climate politics.

Many different policies and government actions were covered by alternative media throughout the year from a proposed gas plant in Fort Nelson (Dembicki 2009a) and the possible closure of the Burrard Thermal generating stations (Paley 2009a) to the potential for improved forestry policies to reduce emissions (Wieting 2009) and the environmental implications of the province's shift to a harmonized sales tax (Sterk 2009; Dauncey 2009). It is fair to say, however, that two initiatives consistently received more attention than others during 2009: the Gateway infrastructure program and the independent power projects (IPPs) of private companies to expand the supply of for-profit renewable energy in British Columbia. As noted, Gateway served as a lightning rod for those criticizing provincial government spin

for exaggerating the impact of a few key policies such as the carbon tax while minimizing how other government actions would contribute to increasing emissions levels. Many pieces focused predominantly on the negative aspects of the project including the role of highway expansion in facilitating low-density, high-emission patterns of suburban growth and its destructive impact upon wildlife habitat. The most compelling criticisms of Gateway, however, were those which (re)framed the project as a *political choice* between increasing reliance upon existing forms of automotive transport (which is the largest source of emissions in British Columbia) or switching to new systems of mass transit. In March, *Tyee* editor David Beers wrote a lengthy article discussing a study by Patrick Condon, a professor with the UBC Design Centre for Sustainability, which found that the \$3.1 billion allocated to a single new ten-lane bridge (to replace a smaller five-lane structure which still has thirty years remaining in its lifespan) could, instead, be used to

to finance a 200-kilometre light rail network that would place a modern, European-style tram within a 10-minute walk for 80 per cent of all residents in Surrey, White Rock, Langley and the Scott Road district of Delta, while providing a rail connection from Surrey to the new Evergreen Line connecting Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge into the regional rail system (2009b).

Rather than simply present a list of complaints about the project and demand that it be stopped, this article offered a positive alternative vision of how public resources could be more efficiently and effectively allocated. It challenged the public to ‘think big’ in terms of how we might make our neighbourhoods and communities more liveable and environmentally friendly, kick-starting a process of imagining what a more sustainable future might actually like. Equally significant, drawing attention to the enormous cost of maintaining and expanding existing structures of automobility recasts such (utopian) visions of sustainability as eminently reasonable and practical, well within the power of governments to achieve. Most importantly, technocratic decisions about infrastructure are repositioned as political choices which ought to involve a democratic discussion, debate and choice between different options (and the broader values which they invoke). “A real comparison between reasonable alternatives,” explained Condon, “would enhance our ability to choose wisely. How we deploy the available billions on transportation infrastructure over the next 10 to 15 years will determine how sustainable this region will or won’t be 100 years from now” (Cited in Beers 2009b). Beyond this initial article, the bridge vs LRT network meme was reproduced in a number of other news and opinion pieces (e.g. Dembicki 2009b; Kimmett 2009c; Kettlewell 2009; M’Gonigle and Anderson 2009) which consequently helped recapture the conceptual high ground of ‘progress’ from those defending the project: instead of appearing simply as ‘naysayers’ trying to stop development, Gateway’s opponents could represent themselves as far-sighted proponents of truly sustainable development based upon practical and cost/carbon-effective public transit. In contrast, *The Vancouver Sun*, the province’s leading daily broadsheet, did not include a single reference to the Condon study throughout the entire year.

The second cluster of items focused upon the controversial provincial decision to encourage the development of private sector renewable energy projects which largely took the form of relatively small-scale ‘run-of-river’ hydroelectric projects on rivers throughout British Columbia. The initiative was controversial for a variety of reasons, including the ecological impact of these projects (and their related infrastructure) upon pristine watersheds and endangered salmon runs, the prioritization of for-profit development through the exclusion of B.C. Hydro (the public utility) from these projects, the perception that such power would primarily be exported to other jurisdictions (and thus would bring few benefits to local B.C. residents) and the inability of local governance bodies to regulate or veto such projects. Just as impressive as the detailed level of analysis and opinion which alternative media brought to bear upon these issues was how so many items implicitly positioned local debates over IPP as a means of concretely working through much broader political and philosophical questions raised by climate change. In a wide-

ranging op-ed for *The Tyee*, for example, M’Gonigle (2009b) used the controversy to explore the disturbing congruence between discourses of renewable energy and the larger paradigms of industrial development and economic growth which are responsible for the current crisis.

Is ‘more sustainable development’ about new electric cars, new power supplies, new energy exports, efficiency to meet new demand? Is there not a problem here? In a country with some of the highest per-capita energy usage levels on the planet, where is the discussion of seriously reducing energy demand overall and doing it for the long term? ... [G]enerating new “alternative” sources of supply will never get us past the climate crunch because they confront a central contradiction: continuous economic growth that will just swallow up whatever gains are made, all the while upping the environmental impacts.

Gwen Barlee (2009), a policy director for the Wilderness Committee (a local BC environmental organization), likewise framed her criticism of a specific IPP project in Bute Inlet (a remote area of Vancouver Island) as part of a broader debate about the difference between private vs public approaches to the development of renewable energy. Where the former prioritizes short-term profit, the latter balances the need to develop low-carbon energy with larger considerations of the public good as defined through a comprehensive environmental assessment process, democratic consultation with local communities and a coordinated approach to increasing energy efficiency and conservation. Paired with Barlee’s op-ed, Steve Davis (2009), head of the Independent Power Producers Association of BC, countered Barlee’s claims by recasting IPPs as part of a broader public system designed to serve the needs of the public. Irrespective of the merits of these competing perspectives, the deeper significance of these two pieces (and others like them) was their mutual framing of renewable energy policy as a political (rather than a technocratic) matter which ought to be shaped through a public discussion in which questions of profit and economic development must be balanced against considerations of ecological sustainability and the autonomy of local communities. Readers, in other words, are positioned as citizens who can and must choose between different approaches to sustainable development. Moreover, such items embed discussion of abstract issues such as democracy, capitalism, technology and sustainability within a local, empirical context in which people are motivated to engage in climate politics because of how it directly shapes the communities and environments in which they live.

“The real solutions” to climate change, argued Rex Wyler, “will demand a paradigm shift as dramatic as when Copernicus pointed out that the universe did not revolve around the Earth. The answer will be in localization, based less on foreign-made goods, debt, and commuting, and more on friends, local food and community cohesion. The new normal will be about improving the quality of life without consuming more stuff” (2009). Optimistic paens to localization were common in alternative media, especially in the pages of *The Straight*, which frequently championed the idea of downscaling to a local level as the foundation upon which sustainable forms of living might be constructed. This theme dovetailed neatly with the program and priorities of the provincial Green Party: while the policies of the Greens were largely ignored by mainstream media, they received considerable attention from *The Straight* during the May provincial election (e.g. Hui 2009; Burrows 2009a; Lupick 2009), including an endorsement from the paper’s editorial board (*Straight* editorial staff 2009). In a guest op-ed on the eve of the election, Damian Kettlewell (2009), the party’s deputy leader, argued that

The greatest job opportunities for the current and next generation of British Columbians will come from localized markets that are based less on foreign-made goods, less on assuming large debt, and less about commuting. These locally-based jobs will be increasingly based upon local communities, local food, and the genuine needs of local people.

Such sentiments were taken up in a more substantive and engaged fashion by *Straight* editor Charlie Smith (2009a) in a lengthy feature news article – at over 2,500 words, it was one of the longest items to

appear in alternative media in 2009 – which explored how “a burgeoning relocalization movement has the potential to revolutionize the way we eat, shop, work, and vacation”. The piece brought together a wide range of example of increasingly localized consumption practices from the food, clothing, entertainment, building and manufacturing sectors with a more philosophical discussion inspired by recent bestsellers critiquing globalization, including Jeff Rubin’s *Why Your World Is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller: Oil and the End of Globalization*, John Ralston Saul’s *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World* and Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. An excellent example of the ‘big ideas’ genre discussed earlier, the item developed and applied the concept of localization at a variety of levels: first, as a means of describing empirical trends in the production and consumption of local goods and services; second, as an increasingly important normative concept through which individuals were coordinating lifestyle, identity and political values; and, third, an economic and political ideal, connected with related ideals of democracy, social justice and sustainability, which could be realized through a range of policies and regulatory structures at the local, national and international level.

In accord with this localization frame, cities were often identified as critical sites for political action on climate change (even though, as noted above, the city of Vancouver received considerably less specific attention than either the provincial or federal government). As former B.C. premier and former Vancouver mayor Mike Harcourt noted, cities are

where the greenhouse gases are created. They are created by how we house, transport, power, feed ourselves. Those cities are where we consume too much. People in cities produce one half of Canada’s greenhouse gases. The other half comes from the oil and gas fields, farms, mines, and forestry mills, whose products are shipped from rural areas to be consumed by people living in cities. (2009)

After establishing that urban space constitutes a relevant and useful scale in which to examine the origins of emissions, Harcourt went on to describe various climate-related policies and initiatives which are currently under way in different Canadian cities, making a powerful case that all of the ingredients for an effective national response to climate change are already in place at the local level. “What’s missing,” he concludes, “is a clearly articulated vision binding all these initiatives and cooperative action .... Instead, all those incredibly exciting sustainable initiatives across Canada are lost in the cacophony of competing claims about the Kyoto Accord.” David Cadman, local city councillor and president of ICLEA-Local Governments for Sustainability, was an equally strong advocate for civic action. During the Copenhagen summit, for instance, he explained how “Vancouver continues to prove by example that economic progress is not mutually exclusive of our collective responsibility to stop climate change” (2009). In June *The Straight* devoted a 2,200 word story to exploring the development of Metro Vancouver’s regional growth strategy, signaling to its readers that these relatively ignored and often arcane planning processes are critical sites for climate action given their long-term impact upon patterns of urban growth (Smith 2009b). Discussions of climate change often identify cities as fertile sites of innovative government action; alternative media fleshed out this optimism with details about how the power of urban governments to shape and regulate housing density, land use, transportation infrastructure, water and energy systems can have a major impact upon emission levels (Kopecky 2009). Compared to coverage of national and provincial politics, the focus on cities was almost entirely policy-based, emphasizing the technical aspects of effective climate governance rather than exploring the role of urban political activism in stimulating and ensuring such governance. Nevertheless, this focus played a key role in framing local political institutions as appropriate, effective and accessible venues for climate action.

**From cynical observer to engaged citizen: Normalizing climate activism**

The most striking difference between alternative and mainstream media's presentation of climate politics was the extensive and largely sympathetic coverage which the former provided to climate activism. The single most consistent theme running through virtually all coverage of climate change was the need for more political will to address the problem. As one young Greenpeace activist put it,

The voices of this generation are screaming for vision, leadership, and change .... The environmental movement has identified solutions. It is urging governments to move into a clean, green energy economy that will bolster the economy, create jobs and improve our environment .... We have the scientific analysis. We have the green technology. We have the desire and the need. What we must have now is the political will. For the sake of this generation and the ones to come, we must find it (Wilson 2009).

Suzuki often ended his columns with similar calls to action: "If we speak loudly enough, they will listen" (2009b); "we know where the problems lie, and science offers many solutions. Now it's time for action" (2009j); "we can all take individual action to reduce our emissions, but ultimately we must let our leaders know that we expect them to seize the opportunity in Copenhagen" (2009g); "visionary leadership requires active and engaged citizens to keep the politicians' feet to the fire. Your efforts have never been needed more to make this happen" (2009c). Where mainstream media often deploy a 'regime of objectivity' (Hackett and Zhao 1998) that positions the audience as passive consumers of news, alternative media both assume and interpellate a readership which are eager to engage with climate politics as active citizens. Where mainstream media often depict climate politics as a reified sphere in which the capacity to exercise political choice has been stripped from individuals, alternative media adopt a moralized language of crisis, agency and collective responsibility, insisting that the choice of whether to mobilize global resources to confront climate change or continue with business-as-usual is one that properly belongs to everyone. Instead of presenting neutral, impartial accounts of the world, alternative media are far more likely to use facts and figures as the building blocks of argument and opinion, normalizing an active and engaged orientation to the world in which one is motivated and even compelled to make political choices and assume some measure of political accountability for them. This is not to say that polemic entirely displaces journalism, but instead that the luxury of being a casual, disinterested observer of climate politics is a much harder identity to sustain in the discursive universe of alternative media.

At times, the demand for increased political engagement appeared more rhetorical than substantive, with calls for political activism coming across as somewhat generic and formulaic rather than substantive. This was especially the case when such demands were not accompanied with any concrete advice or even speculative consideration about *how* citizens might actually participate. Urging the public to get involved in climate politics is one thing but explaining the different ways through which they actually can get involved is something quite different. As Tzaporah Berman put it in an interview with *The Straight*, "we now have an over-developed consumption muscle and an under-developed civil-engagement muscle" (Cited in Burrows 2009b). Passionate but hollow affirmations of the virtues of collective political action risk becoming little more than activist clichés, rhetorical fetishes which may intensify the public's craving for political agency but leave them no better informed about how they might act to satisfy it. Indeed, moralized injunctions to 'get active' but fail to teach people how to make the transition from passive observer to engaged citizen can, paradoxically, intensify perceptions of political alienation and guilt, leaving individuals feeling even more apathetic, dispirited and disengaged.

Fortunately, however, the rhetorical celebrations of climate activism which often appeared in alternative media were backed up with detailed, specific and even, occasionally, narratively grounded accounts of activist political engagement. References to collective political climate activism, including

demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, letter-writing campaigns and so on, appeared in 14 percent (51 items) of all items. At first glance, this number might seem unremarkable; yet the fact that one out of every seven stories on climate change featured *actual practices* (rather than simply abstract notions) of citizen engagement suggests the key role that an activist orientation played in alternative media representations of climate politics. Most importantly, it transformed such politics from a spectacle to be observed into a *site of struggle*, a fluid and dynamic space of political action in which members of the public can and do intervene to shape the policies and priorities of government. This emphasis stands in marked contrast to mainstream media's tendency to ignore and marginalize attention to political activism. Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, for example, found that references to activism such as demonstrations were the *least* common form through which the public appeared in the news: people, in other words, were highly unlikely to see themselves represented as activists (2005: 23). My research on B.C. regional media coverage of the Copenhagen summit confirms the significant differences between the two types of media in this regard: while collective political actions were mentioned in only 6 percent of the items from the two major daily newspapers, they appeared in close to 35 percent of alternative media stories during the same three week period (Gunster 2010).

Not surprisingly, the focus upon activism was at its height in the weeks before and during the Copenhagen summit when the pages of both *The Tyee* and *The Straight* were filled with stories about the different actions that a wide range of individuals and groups were taking to push national governments to negotiate a fair, effective and binding agreement. More than simply report upon actions after they had taken place, both venues ensured that events such as the October 24, 2009 International Day of Climate Action (consisting of thousands of coordinated events in more than 150 countries) were well publicized in advance of their occurrence. Indeed, news and op-ed items commonly featured information about upcoming actions and openly invited the public to participate in them, drawing a direct link between frustration with the slow pace of conventional climate politics and activist protest as a means of driving change. Ben West, an activist with the Wilderness Committee, described the October 24 protest as “a real demonstration of citizen power. People around the world are not willing to wait for politicians to lead. Citizens worldwide are organizing according to nontraditional organizing methods” (Burrows 2009d). A news story on a United Church led hunger strike – “the Fast for Courage at Copenhagen” – blended critical analysis of the Copenhagen talks with a profile of a church minister and his congregation who had organized the event after being inspired by similar actions in other Canadian cities. “I’m hoping,” observed the minister, “and we’re hoping, that this can make a little bit of difference. I’ll tell you, for me, personally, it’s just an alternative to growing disenchantment and cynicism in what I regard as a kind of lack of leadership around this particular issue” (Cited in Burrows 2009c).

Taken on their own, actions such as these might appear irrelevant or naive, but the steady accumulation of such stories and testimonials can grow into powerful narratives of collective mobilization and political momentum in which particular examples of climate activism are framed as both expressive and constitutive of broader trends in public opinion as well as transformative social movements. Immediately after describing recent polls showing high public support for stronger emission targets, *Tyee* reporter Colleen Kimmitt explained that “there have been arrests on Parliament Hill, occupations of MP’s offices and protests around the country. People who have never waved a banner in their lives are joining in the protest of how Canada is behaving in Copenhagen, including a minister in Toronto who has sworn to fast for seven days.” (2009a) The shape of public opinion on climate change, in other words, was directly linked to the actions of protesters, reversing the polarity which otherwise often accompanies the representation of protest as qualitatively different from the views of most people. In a similar vein Suzuki noted that “it’s been heartening to see so many people, especially young people, taking to the streets and Parliament Hill, writing to MPs and prime ministers, and joining campaigns to urge governments to be a

part of the solution to global warming. Millions of people turned out recently for more than 5,000 International Day of Climate Action events in 180 countries.” (2009e) Bringing a broadly global and historical lens to the political activism on display in Copenhagen, Naomi Klein cast the emerging movement for climate justice as challenging the power of corporate capitalism by offering a compelling vision for how societies could be organized differently: “activists in Copenhagen won’t simply say no to [corporate capitalism]. They will aggressively advance solutions that simultaneously reduce emissions and narrow inequality. Unlike at previous summits where alternatives seemed like an afterthought, in Copenhagen the alternatives will take center stage.” (2009) Analyses like this performs the vital function of knitting individual actions together into a political tapestry which enables those involved in such actions, as well as those sympathetic to them, to understand the long-term significance of those actions as going far beyond their specific and/or immediate impacts in terms of the contribution to building a popular movement for climate justice.

Moreover, Klein’s astute expansion of the activist frame to include alternatives and solutions as well as protest and anger was reflective of the more complex portrait which alternative media provided of climate activism. Political activism was not simply characterized as protest, but also as a means of engaging in a constructive, grassroots dialogue about climate solutions. Deliberative fora such as the People’s Climate Summit (*Klimaforum 09*) – a gathering of hundreds of non-government organizations from around the world, including environmental groups, labour unions, farmers, students and local community organizations – received considerable attention in *The Tyee* and *The Straight*, illuminating a positive, solutions-focused dimension to climate activism (e.g. Hiskes 2009; Ravensbergen 2009; Beresford 2009). In direct contrast to the gridlock and intransigence of the formal negotiations, these stories helped (re)establish the viability setting priorities, building policies and negotiating compromises through creative and innovative processes of consultation, dialogue, participation and collaboration, each of which was guided by values of empathy and the common good, rather than personal and national self-interest. Challenging representations of the primary divisions of climate politics as only constituted through national identity, these fora (and alternative media coverage of them) offered alternative political narratives defined by emerging affinities between ‘ordinary’ people from all countries based on basic principles of justice and equity. Beyond the virtues of any particular proposal or policy, the real significance of such coverage lay in how it challenged dominant images of climate politics as a space of delay, division and failure, instead providing compelling evidence that alternative forms of political engagement are not only possible, but actively practiced by those committed to charting a different course on climate change.

While environmental activists are often attacked as harbingers of doom, the infusion of activist sentiments into the environmental journalism of alternative media helped produce news and opinion which was, on the whole, far more hopeful than that which we tend to get from mainstream media on this issue. Both *The Straight* and *The Tyee* opened their op-ed pages to political activists directly engaged in the politics of climate change at both a global and a local level. Unlike mainstream media where activists typically appear (if at all) as one source or soundbite among many, alternative media provided them with ample space to weave their ideas and their passion into a coherent set of arguments and, more importantly perhaps, serve as powerful exemplars of an engaged political subjectivity. We will end this section by taking a closer look at a couple of op-eds from local activists which brilliantly fused a critical analysis of climate politics with optimistic accounts of grassroots climate activism as a growing social force.

The first piece, written by transportation and climate activist Carmen Mills (2009), was published in *The Straight* during the first week of the Copenhagen summit. Mills argued that local forms of direct action was the best way for B.C. citizens to join the global struggle against climate change which the United Nations negotiations had momentarily thrust into the media spotlight. The piece opened by

celebrating the actions of a small but diverse group of Vancouver residents, including Patrick Condon (the UBC professor who had authored the study referred to above), who had gathered a few days earlier to protest the project. Mills presented a brief but powerful critique of Gateway, noting its disastrous impact upon local eco-systems as well as the emissions growth which would result from the increased automobile use and suburban sprawl the project would enable. She then explained how the new highway construction was only one part of a province-wide strategy to expand provincial transportation infrastructure in service of increasing trade with Asian markets. As noted above, a crucial but relatively unknown element of the strategy involves the construction of a pipeline from the Alberta tar sands to the B.C. coast to enable direct exports of oil and bitumen via tankers to China and India. Protesting against a local road-building project, in other words, was explicitly framed in much broader terms as an opportunity for Vancouver residents to join an international struggle against a globalized fossil fuel economy.

As our leaders gather in Copenhagen in an attempt to chart a course out of the global climate crisis, the worldwide movement toward direct action is gaining momentum fast .... as important as emission-reduction targets and international agreements are, it is equally important to focus on what is simple and within our reach. Here in B.C., our job in the fight against climate change is to stop Gateway here and now.

Mills challenged characterizations of direct action as ineffectual, reminding her readers that citizen action in the past had “stopped highway expansion in Vancouver in the 70s” and the WTO protests in Seattle had “focused the eyes of the world on the specter of global trade expansion”. Tracing the largely forgotten history of collective action in shaping the world we live in today helps awaken and invigorate conceptions of political activism as a powerful tool of social and political change: dreams of future victories are nourished by memories of past achievements. “We may not have stopped this project yet, but we can. The twin forces of global awareness and the climate crisis are growing exponentially, and there is every possibility that five years from now, the Gateway project may seem like the worst idea that almost happened.” Mills ended the piece on a personal note, suggesting that the benefits of democratic participation are not limited to their effect on the political process. “Please join us,” she wrote, “it feels great to get active and to realize you are far from alone. And you may gain some stories that your children and grandchildren will be very proud to hear.” One cannot underestimate the impact that such simple language can have in magnifying the appeal of messages like this. Echoing the positive tonality of the solutions-based journalism discussed above, Mills’ account of how activism *makes her feel*, as distinguished from why she thinks it is the right thing to do or the political effects she hopes it will have, magnifies the potential for activism to resonate with her readers at an emotional and affective level.

The second piece appeared a week later in *The Tyee* and was authored by Jamie Biggar (2009) in his capacity as a member of the Canadian Youth Delegation, a group of young Canadians who traveled to Copenhagen to pressure the federal government to play a more constructive role in the negotiations. Biggar’s op-ed was published in the form of a dialogue with university professor Michael M’Gonigle who, as noted earlier, had argued (2009a; 2009c) that it would be better for the Copenhagen negotiations to fail than produce an agreement which left dominant economic and political structures fundamentally untouched. Real progress on climate change, M’Gonigle asserted, was impossible until core questions of economic growth, and the role of states and markets in protecting and promoting it, were addressed. While Biggar largely agreed with these claims, he also argued that climate politics is increasingly filled with examples of activism and political radicalization which make such transformation more rather than less likely. “Climate treaty summits have a funny way of radicalizing people whose gut instinct is to be part of the establishment,” he wrote, citing climate scientist James Hansen’s adoption of the tactics of civil disobedience to challenge the U.S. coal industry. “The list of establishment types who no longer believe that regular channels can solve the problem is getting longer.” After a thoughtful and extensive reflection

on the question “how do we get what we can from the dominant institutions that exist today while we build the dominant institutions that we need tomorrow,” Biggar ended, like Mills, with a hopeful reflection upon his own personal experience as an activist. “I’m thinking about the thousands of Canadians,” he mused,

that have worked together over the last months and are now making phone calls and hitting the streets – many of whom, maybe most, had never been politically engaged before in their lives. I know that for many of these people, certainly for myself, this is the first time that they have felt like they were part of something so much bigger than themselves. There’s something powerful brewing, M.M., something that almost shakes with its energy and potential.

Brilliantly shifting between a normative injunction to practice a different kind of politics and an empirical description of those politics in action, pieces such as these invite the public to join with like-minded others in a collective, political response to the failures and shortcomings of existing political institutions. Activism not apathy was, again, normalized as the most logical and the most satisfying response to a pervasive crisis of political alienation.

In a fascinating study of the impact of social norms upon environmental behaviour, Vladas Griskevicius and his colleagues (2008) distinguish between injunctive norms (prescriptions of how people *should* behave) and descriptive norms (descriptions of how people *are* behaving), arguing that the latter are far more effective than the former in motivating and shaping behaviour. Showing people that others – and, preferably, others *like them*, with whom they can identify and empathize – are engaging in a particular form of action is a far better means of persuasion than simply explaining or asserting the need for or the benefits of that form of action. Indeed, when such explanations are framed in negative terms (as they often are) – e.g. it is terrible that the Canadian public is not more involved in climate politics because it is an issue which affects us all – they can have the perverse effect of strengthening the undesirable behaviour because it is paradoxically represented as ‘normal’. While Griskevicius applies these insights to everyday forms of behaviour, they are equally helpful in thinking about how to expand the forms of political action which citizens consider normal. According to this logic, the best means of increasing civic engagement would be to represent such behaviour as common, widespread, pleasurable and politically effective: in short, as *normal*. We need stories which feature testimonials from individual activists, not only describing their moral or political convictions but also, and more importantly, narrative accounts of their personal experience of becoming politically active and how that experience makes them feel, has affected their identity and changed how they understand and engage with the world. Such narratives help to close the gap between citizens and activists, smoothing the transition from the former to the latter as people come to see different forms of democratic engagement as normal activities which others just like them are doing (and enjoying) in order to express and act upon their political beliefs and moral values.

### **Facing the future: Environmental apocalypse, climate politics and alternative media**

Some might fault the vision of alternative media we have developed here as both selective and idealized, an overly optimistic portrait which exaggerates the potential of this medium to lead the way in motivating civic engagement with climate politics. And there is probably some truth to that criticism. Rather than provide a systematic overview of how alternative media represents climate change, our goal has been to explore what we found to be the most praiseworthy features in its coverage of climate politics. In particular, we wanted to showcase its tendency to challenge the sclerotic, hidebound and thoroughly cynical visions of such politics which so often dominates the public sphere by reminding the public that, to invoke the slogan of global social justice, another world *is* possible. Governments *can* implement more active climate policies, not simply because they should, but because other governments *are* implementing

(and benefitting) from such policies already; more importantly, citizens *can* become (more) active in climate politics not simply because they should, but because thousands – *millions* – of others like them *are* active in countless different ways. Prescription and description come together in a virtuous iterative cycle in which alternative media use stories of both policy and activist success to fuel ever increasing levels of civic engagement.

Our emphasis upon success stories should not, however, be understood as endorsing the increasingly common view that climate change communication must abandon ‘alarming’ talk of rising sea levels, global drought, species extinction and climate chaos for sunnier, bi-partisan narratives about energy independence, green jobs and sustainable communities. Indeed, much of the rhetorical force of alternative media discourse on climate change arose precisely out of its deliberate juxtaposition of those two very different visions of our collective future. After all, heaven and hell each depend upon the other for their meaning and significance. As Futerra Communications, a British firm specializing in climate change messaging, notes “today we have a choice between that positive picture [of sustainable societies] and the alternative of unmitigated climate change. It’s extremely important to hammer home that this moment is the moment of choice between the two paths.” (2009: 5)

Alternative media never pulled its punches when it came to referring to the impacts of global warming, either upon British Columbia or the world more broadly. Columnist Gwynne Dyer, for example, soberly described a possible rise in average global temperatures beyond 2 degrees celsius as the point of no return. Further warming would trigger natural processes that release vast quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere from melting permafrost and warming oceans. These processes, once begun, are unstoppable, and could make the planet four, five, or six degrees hotter than the present by the end of the century. At those temperatures, much of the planet turns to desert, and the remaining farmland, mostly in the high latitudes, can support at best ten or 20 percent of the world’s current population (2009a).

As the Copenhagen talks collapsed, Dyer explained that “each year in which we don’t reach an adequate global climate deal is probably costing us on the order of fifty million premature deaths between now and the end of the century” (2009b). Frequent references by Dyer and others to global warming ‘tipping points’ – thresholds which, once crossed, activate positive feedback loops which take away our ability to do anything to mitigate catastrophic climate change – were extremely effective in making the case for immediate action. Irrespective of how dramatically they may be presented, linear accounts of worsening climate impacts (e.g. *rising* sea levels, *declining* access to fresh water, etc) always leave open the possibility of taking action at some point in the future. In contrast, the prospect that today’s inaction may *permanently* close that window of opportunity and condemn us (and our children) to a terrifying world of climate chaos demands that we either take action now or *forever* lose the chance.

Drawing upon scholarship in literary and rhetorical criticism, Christina Foust and William Murphy (2009) distinguish between tragic and comic forms of apocalyptic climate change discourse which, they argue, represent agency, temporality and *telos* in qualitatively different ways.

Viewing apocalypse tragically suggests that human agency is limited to ‘following the divine will and behaving in ways decreed by God’ (Wojcik, 1996, p. 314), toward a catastrophic *telos* which is clear and unstoppable. Taking a comic perspective, humans are responsible for a course of actions, giving them some play in influencing their fate (while not totally changing the disastrous outcome foretold, an outcome which is more ambiguous than the tragic *telos*). (154)

The realities of climate science leave little room for honest discourse about climate change to be anything other than broadly apocalyptic in nature: there is simply no other way to truthfully represent the situation we now find ourselves facing (International Panel on Climate Change 2007; Risbey 2008). However, whether the apocalyptic character of such discourse is tragic or comic depends much less on how climate

impacts are portrayed and much more on how the politics of climate change are represented. At their best, alternative media position civic engagement and collective action as giving us the chance to avoid disaster. And as such, they constitute an invaluable ally and resource for climate change communicators in motivating and mobilizing deeper, broader public awareness of climate politics, as well as the many ways in which people can get involved in the fight against climate change.

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