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Banal Environmentalism: Defining and Exploring an Expanded Understanding of Ecological Identity, Awareness, and Action

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Banal Environmentalism: Defining and Exploring an Expanded Understanding of Ecological Identity, Awareness, and Action

Ryan Cunningham

ABSTRACT

This paper is an effort to move beyond antiquated models of environmental agency based on overt political protest and other forms of morally-motivated activism. I will argue that a more productive and relevant framework can be found in the notion of 'banal environmentalism,' a project identity founded on everyday consumptive experience in which dimensions of citizenship, consumerism, practice, and political engagement are intimately tied to mediation but share complex and often inconsistent relationships with one another. I will then describe an empirical investigation designed to explore relationships between these distinct dimensions of the banal environmentalism hypothesis in the context of energy efficiency, as encountered and experienced by individuals active in particularistic public spheres online. I will discuss the support this data provides for the hypothesis, and outline the resulting challenges and paradoxes posed to both ongoing critical media scholarship as well as the burgeoning green marketplace.

1.

are not motivated or supported by genuinely environmentally-aware commitments? Is there a market-

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The core goal of the theoretical exploration contained in this section is to build a new understanding of the environmentally-ethical actions and intentions observed in individuals which can be operationalized into productive research. This will be accomplished via four key steps. First, I will disassociate perceived ecological risk from an objective conception of the natural world, exposing the mediated and contextual nature of environmental dangers. I will then broadly review several key insights from the field of identity politics to outline a framework for understanding the role of the individual in responding to these mediated dangers. I will also acknowledge the assumptions and intentions of a growing consumer marketplace of goods and services seeking to capitalize on these individual responses. I will then move toward an actionable research agenda by borrowing from the concept of 'mediated public connection' to contextualize the roles of citizenship and consumerism. Ultimately, I will synthesize from these explorations a new concept of 'banal environmentalism,' summarizing its components and operationalizing its research implications.

MORAL MISSIONS IN THE RISK CONTEXT

It is this focus on the role of individuals that leads Beck, in later work, to define and advocate a cosmopolitan solution to the abstraction of risk (Beck, 2002b, 2006). This position places faith in self-reflexive individuals who are able to transcend the institutionalization of hazards; to reach across artificial and increasingly irrelevant boundary constructions such as national identity and the supremacy of science; to act politically and personally in the interests of both themselves and others. However, Beck ultimately fails to sufficiently address the complexities of positive actions made by individuals in the service of environmental conservation, particularly those decisions not entirely driven by an overt cosmopolitan consciousness (Ignatow, 2007). In the contemporary context of a flourishing market for 'eco-friendly' goods and services and an emerging fashion of individual behavior-changes (Grant, 2007), this proactive field of non-activist action poses an intriguing challenge to the frameworks of risk society and cosmopolitanism. (e) -1 ()-1 (m)mn20f-ctivisaoding6h

dimensions. Mediated public connection, they conclude, is “more likely to occur when peoples’ disparate activities (as social being, audience member, and public actor) *intersect* in at least one common domain, whether it is local, national, or, rarely, global” (Couldry,

3. FRAMING THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

the same time consumer lifestyle options, such as hybrid vehicles or 'clean energy' tariffs, are readily available on the US and European markets with a wide and increasing level of awareness. The spectrum of these products ranges from low-investment goods, such as compact fluorescent light bulbs or solar-powered alarm clocks, to high-investment lifestyle-changing products such as all-

about the nature and extent of *relative* correlations and associations between distinct dimensions in the energy-related decisions of individuals. The survey methodology in this context is thus very much a quantitative means to a qualitative end.

The third section of the survey was designed to measure the final component of interest to the banal environmentalism model in this context—connections to energy-related media connection. The approach, discussed here as a “media mapping” exercise, asked respondents to identify specific examples, in their own words, of media they had recently encountered which had some relevance to energy. To encourage and organize these responses, the question was repeated within different media format categories—

these sites' forums enjoyed a high degree of traffic, the level of response to the survey was surprisingly small and did not afford a sufficient number of respondents to conduct tests of statistical inference.

Hoping to reach active micro public spheres, I only posted solicitations to discussion communities that appeared to have a high rate of activity, with multiple messages posted daily. I also intentionally attempted to focus on sites and communities serving a primarily UK-based audience. This was an inherently difficult proposition, however, and I did not strictly avoid the responses of individuals from other geographic areas. Indeed, as the data show (see Appendix D), respondents' locations ultimately varied independently of most of the key indicators of banal environmentalism.

It should be openly acknowledged here that many of the above methodological decisions were made subjectively on my own intuition of how to best pursue media connectors exhibiting aspects of banal environmentalism. The study is neither designed nor qualified to make comparative assertions about banal environmentalism in populations of non-media connectors, nor to attempt to quantify the comparative frequency with which media connectors exhibit these traits. True to the research question, the primary focus of this study is to explore the dynamic relationships within and between distinct aspects of banal environmentalism, not to identify groups within the population who are most likely to exhibit those qualities. As such, the measures of statistical inference below are only relevant to the population of media connectors from which the project sampled, who were selected as primary candidates for exhibiting these traits based on the work of Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007). Their role is thus important but ultimately tangential to the core goals of the research.

DIALOGUE AND EVOLUTION

A final methodological note worth mentioning lies in the experience of interacting with respondents. Despite the traditionally impersonal nature of quantitative methodology—particularly an electronic survey—it became clear early in the piloting phase of the project that the online media connectors responding to the survey were interested in some measure of dialogue. Outside of the media mapping exercise, the initial draft of the survey contained few opportunities for interaction: there was an option at the end of the form to sign up to receive a copy of the completed report, and I often included my email address when posting

the survey to discussion communities in case any potential respondents had questions or concerns. Based on the feedback received, I added several optional, open-ended explanation boxes throughout the survey so that respondents could contextualize their answers. Roughly a quarter chose to do so; several others decided to reach out via email or discuss the survey within their communities.

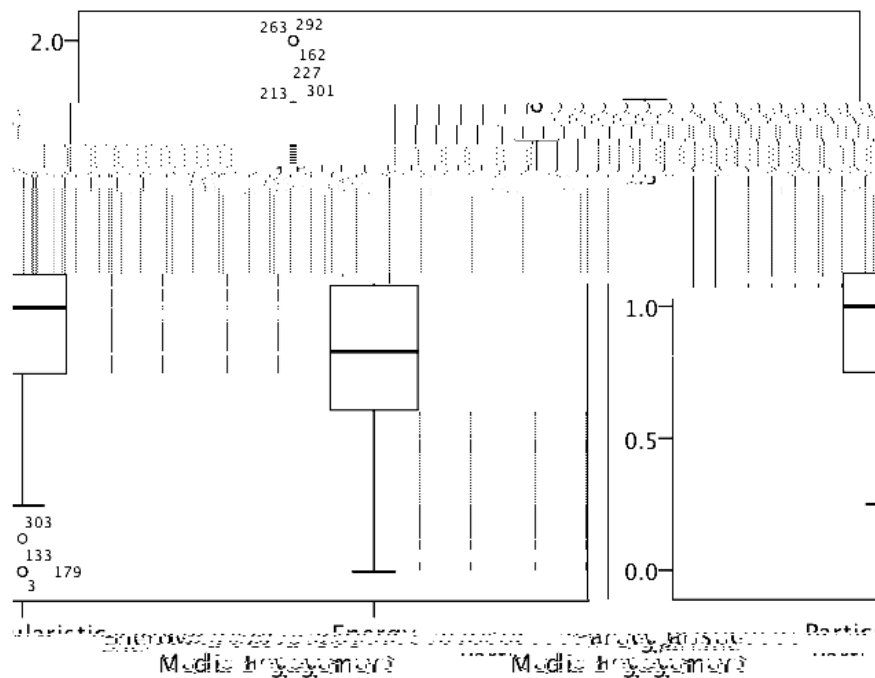
While I did not develop a standardized coding frame for interpreting this data in the ultimate analysis, it was a useful for refining the survey during its early piloting phases.

The final measures of banal environmentalism relevant here relate not to the internal definitions described above, but begin to touch on individuals' relationships to others around them and to themselves in the future. The agree-disagree statements were worded "I'm personally likely to make *major lifestyle changes* in the next few years to be more efficient" and "I probably do *more than the average person* to live an efficient lifestyle" (emphasized text was bold when delivered in the survey). The sample distributions of each ordinal, categorical variable are visualized in Figure 6. At a 95% level of confidence, we can expect the a population self-concept score of between .84 and 1.01, indicating tha

MEASURING RELEVANT MEDIA CONNECTION

The most basic measures of media connection are aggregate values assembled for both the micro public sphere context from which participants were recruited and the energy-related media about which they were questioned. Each measure is based on two variables—first, respondents' identification of media formats in which they engaged with the topic and, second, their self-described level of engagement ranging from occasional and passive encounters to regular, active contribution of content. Sample distributions of these media engagement indices are pictured in Figure 7. Not surprisingly, the data suggests that respondents recruited from micro public spheres tend to have a higher level of engagement with the particularistic media of their interest than with media containing energy-related content ($t = -4.457, p < .01$). The magnitude of that difference, however, is hardly dramatic—between only .189 and .073 points at a 95% level of confidence. The measures

Figure 7: Sample Distributions of Particularistic and Energy Media Engagement Scores



Via the media mapping exercise described in the methodology section, the survey looked more closely at energy media connection by asking respondents to identify specific examples of energy-related media they had recently encountered and rate that media on both their level of intentionality in encountering it and their perception of its credibility. The repetition of this activity across four media categories reveals an interesting, though somewhat tangential, comparative analysis between online, broadcast, and print media (see Appendix G for data) suggesting users of online and print media are more likely to both actively seek and find credible, energy-relevant information than consumers of broadcast media. This inference may be somewhat biased by the sampling strategy of recruiting media connectors already active online, but at the same time is corroborated by higher scores in the print and 'other' categories and is consistent with the more specific and particularistic nature of web-based information (Dahlgren, 2005).

These three measures are more useful to the ultimate analysis of energy citizenship when considered in aggregate, however, and in an effort to generalize them across media formats new variables were calculated based on the mean scores of each response. These aggregate calculations were made only for respondents who replied to at least three of the possible four media format categories; as all of these responses were optional and many

individuals left some of them blank, the sample size of aggregate intentionality, credibility, and relevance data (n = 135, 132, and 136 respectively) is significantly smaller than the total survey sample size (n = 347).

Figure 8 displays summary statistics for the distributions of these aggregate variables. More than 75% of the sample recorded positive mean intentionality and credibility scores, suggesting that media connectors do tend to actively seek energy-related information outside of their particularistic public spheres of interest, and feel rewarded by the information they encounter. However, the vast majority of these reported energy information sources score, in aggregate, below a mean of 2.0 points; suggesting that what is sought by these media connectors is, both in content and in source, largely encountered in the context of either general, mass-appeal media sources and topic areas, or in a broader field of so-called 'green' media and information.

Measures of Control

Appendix D displays relevant statistical measures of association between a selection of demographic variables and all the key banal environmentalism indicators explored in the previous sections, as well as a similar comparison of distinct 'micro' public sphere topic areas. These measurements were accomplished by re-coding the continuous variables of aggregate mean citizen, consumer, practice, issue, and media scores into categorical, ordinal groupings. As a means of applying the gamma test of ordinal significance, site of entry categories (defined by topic) were also

recruited across more than ten topic categories, the table below considers only the five categories from which a sufficient number of individuals responded.

difference is itself negligible in context—it is estimated that media connectors in the US only score between .093 and .534 points less than UK respondents at a 95% level of confidence. These observations cannot be easily overlooked as an issue of sample bias; respondents varied relatively evenly across age, education and income groups.

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6. DISCUSSION

SUPPORT FOR THE BANAL ENVIRONMENTALISM HYPOTHESIS

The preceding data in many ways supports the banal environmentalism hypothesis outlined at the beginning of this paper; particularly the assumptions that an energy-efficient identity is most likely to be encountered in a mediated environment and expressed via identity-

in which values of environmental citizenship are formed and projected may be founded on a severely limited, abstract understanding of actual ecological challenges; that responses of consumptive agency may be uncoordinated with or even counterproductive to the actual needs of natural reality.

Should this indeed be the case, the marketing of 'green' products is caught in an interesting ethical and operational conundrum. The need to appeal to a project identity based on consumptive agency and disassociated from overtly political environmental activism is real and justified. However, by abstracting ecological context, this very act of disassociation could be undermining both the legitimacy of the project identity and the efficacy of the consumptive action it depends upon—effectively threatening the marketplace for 'green' goods in the first place, regardless of their positioning. This is the critical market failure that John Grant's (2007) optimism overlooks. The manifesto of the mainstreaming of 'green' assumes, at some level, an enduring context of fiscal and cultural incentives to act efficiently and ethically. It fails to consider the fact that this context is not a direct product of objective conditions but rather an indirect, mediated, and highly contingent construction in which the actions of marketers in the mediated environment are highly influential and perhaps, in the long term, even self-destructive.

Extending this speculation, ongoing critical research seeking to understand mediated banal environmentalism also faces distinctly puzzling challenges. Measuring the extent to which ethical and efficient project identities deviate from 'actual' ethical and efficient

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