

Hi,

Response to Ireland 2040 Plan - Issues and Choices [see also attached sabbatical proposal for research]

As an educationalist working in Dublin City University and Head of School of Communications worried about coping with the growth of Higher Education which is set to peak in the mid 2020s, alongside being a committed Environmentalist, who wants to help to protect our environment and face up to the challenges of Climate Change, I am very interested in contributing to this plan. Currently, I'm also involved with our Water Institute in DCU and note the huge issue with over 30% of our private wells contaminated with E.coli.

Over the last few decades I have focused on research around representations of farming and food production, as well as promoting alternative energy and landscape analysis through tourism and film. Most recently I co-hosted a EU COST Summer School in Ireland last August where we held a case study of Wind Farms with 20 EU PhD students and over the next year or so will be working on a new book on Environmental Literacy that will also involve audience research. [see attached].

Much of my research acknowledging the direct benefit of media – especially film – in promoting a love of nature and developing an ecological sensibility, which is necessary to ensure our citizens connect with sustainable and environmental concerns rather than a very short-term preoccupation with 'business as usual' GDP growth as the panacea for all our problems. Ireland has transformed a lot over the decades and now with an aging population and the spectre of Brexit as well as other affects driven by an open-economy, we have to face more challenges.

Proposal to add to Plan:

Need to foreground the active agency of media and education in facilitating a necessary transformation of Irish society towards embracing a more sustainable environmental model of development and spatial planning. By striving with colleagues to promote 'greening the curriculum' and encourage students to develop their critical environmental literacy skills and strive to produce effective media content: from pro-environmental journalism and advertisements, to documentaries and fictional features and animation which foreground new modes of thinking about the environment across health, the energy sector, food production, tourism, transport, education etc. I would suggest for example our society needs several variations of RTE's *Eco-Eye* and *Ear to the Ground* etc. which Higher education students and the development of targeted curricula can help come up with fresh ideas and ways of communicating across new and older generations. We are also considering a new

Brereton, Ireland

Masters program to help address strategies needed to address Ireland's requirement to meet EU targets around carbon emissions and the general move towards a low carbon future.

More personally, regarding Renewable Energy and particularly Farmers and Food – I will be developing case studies for my new book 'Environmental Literacy', I can help to seed fresh ideas for 'green education and marketing' of Ireland which hopefully will help in facing up to the challenge of dealing with Climate Change. Together with colleagues in academia and several in my own school of Communications at DCU, I would strongly recommend that media and education can have a major role in promoting a coherent National Planning Framework and help to ensure it can deliver on its promises.

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**Sabbatical Proposal for 3 week visit to UBC as Visiting Research Fellow**

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**'Environmental Communications and Climate Change: a case study of Low Carbon Energy Transition coupled with Sustainable Food and Farming.'**

**Background**

With increased global concern over food poverty and even obesity, resulting from highly saturated food products and increased factory farming, alongside the prevailing need to influence perceptions and behaviour in supporting alternative energy and heed warnings around climate change, the importance of provocative and insightful media and communications strategies have never been more pertinent.

Taking into account the huge imbalances in poverty across the globe, Western lifestyles will certainly have to radically change. This involves a major transformation of public perceptions and behaviour, especially around food and energy consumption, alongside promoting a low carbon transition model into the future. Some positive evidence of this necessary transformation can be garnered from the uptake of organic farming and the slow food movement, alongside the growth of alternative energy production, through wind farms and solar energy in particular.

Extensive literature reviews across a range of disciplines, including Psychology, Media aesthetics, Environmental Science and Politics that focus on representing all aspects of resource depletion, sustainable agriculture, alternative energy and of course Climate Change, remains an important first step in shaping and framing this centrally important communications research agenda for sustainability and the future survival of our planet. (See for example studies by Hulme, 2009; Pasqualetti, 2011; Weintrobe, 2013 that have particularly influenced this research agenda).

While the interrelated issues of climate change, fossil fuel usage, sustainable agriculture and the general drive towards low carbon transition (see McNally 2016) is often considered as the preserve of science, technology, engineering and economics, there is a growing recognition in the academy and society generally that responding to climate change requires an equally difficult but necessarily shift in the overall communications approach to this so-called wicked problem. Determining how humanity addresses the existential risks created by its own actions cannot be left to so-called hard sciences and engineering alone. Scientific (STEM) research can hopefully develop understanding of the environment and devise new geo-engineering technologies and instruments to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, while moving to a low-carbon future and promoting sustainable agriculture. Fundamentally this involves a social and political act of human transformation. To address this phenomenon, we need to recognise and call upon the power and influence of mass media texts towards promoting this environmental agenda, alongside beginning to understand the psychology of audience perceptions, as well as appreciating the attitudinal and behavioural triggers necessary to undertake such a radical transformation. Research around these core questions, sparked by debates with communications experts from the United States, alongside carrying out primary audiences and other stakeholder research will drive this ongoing research agenda and result in a number of collaborative publications, as well as helping to facilitate some innovative public dissemination events.

Echoing a Scottish Low-Carbon research project I've been co-opted onto, I would concur that it is the centrality of storytelling in the humanities, which provides the common denominator, upon which to base much interdisciplinary thinking. The humanities and communications in particular recognise the pervasive power of narrative as *the* most powerful tool, which can address a multiplicity of publics and if well designed and effective can help change people's thinking, shape their identity, motivate action and predispose the latent potential of citizens

across the world to influence future events. Recent scholarship within climate change and film has endorsed the notion that extending our imaginative capacity is crucial towards devising more effective ways of representing, understanding and promoting action (Brereton, 2016, Rust et al. 2013, etc.). Through a broad range of promotional and powerful narratives – across any media format, including journalism and online media – complex environmental issues can be brought into focus and pulled together in ways that have deep social and cultural resonance, while also becoming more meaningful, accessible and resonant for decision-makers and ordinary citizens alike.

Close interdisciplinary collaboration is needed however to bring together differing understandings of key environmental themes, using enticing meta-narratives. Evaluating how different Irish stories for example present the core environmental issues involved in making the transition to a low-carbon society, can usefully be compared with other countries, including America, and thereby contribute towards teasing out how best to inform, educate and influence public attitudes, as well as facilitating change. By exploring textual, spatial and longitudinal transitions in this way, Humanities and Social Science methodologies focused around film and media analysis can tease out the triggers necessary to spark fruitful public debate and at the same time help promote a critical and environmentally focused citizenship.

Finally, effective public engagement remains a prerequisite towards promoting Low Carbon Energy Transition and informing all forms of sustainable productivity, hence communications research ought to explore effective methods for mobilising behaviour change. While some critics claim such on-going environmental initiatives (which could be dismissed as PR) often end up promoting instrumental forms of societal acceptance, while failing to address the emotional, ethical, political and other aspects of cultural engagement needed to promote successful transition pathways.

Essentially, transition processes remain multi-faceted, involving choices between social, technical and financial solutions, which in turn have consequences for the trajectory of future environmental sustainability, much less for embracing radical social transformation. Consequently, this study seeks to investigate qualitative and quantitative audience and related environmental stakeholder behaviour through mediated audio-visual stories around the framing of Energy Transition, alongside examining the take up of sustainable food productivity.

### **Objectives**

-Media representations of Low Carbon Transition (LCT): At the outset, the process of moving from a carbon intensive environment to one that is more sustainable and promoting energy transition in Ireland and for that matter one suspects America, has appeared to stall. While many stakeholders support the idea of change and the need to move to a post-carbon economy, there remains a lack of public engagement and commitment around the measures necessary to activate this change. This has been demonstrated by empirical studies of media coverage of mainstream press and other online coverage in Ireland and elsewhere. (See upcoming results of an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) funded research project I'm currently involved with here at DCU). Hence a key objective of my ongoing research is to explore how to reverse this trend and more proactively support the move towards taking all aspects of climate change more seriously as *the* 'global challenge' of our century - including adopting low carbon transition and long term sustainability as the primary goals for transformation.

-Media representations of Sustainable Farming and Food Production: With increased global concern over food poverty and even obesity, resulting from highly saturated food products and increased factory farming; this research will explore how environmental documentaries through their use of direct address and creative aesthetics and imaginaries foreground a range of cautionary tales around the ethical importance of modes of food production, waste, and

(over)consumption. Beginning with the proposition that a tremendous amount of moral thinking, feeling and perception is undertaken when watching films, it is suggested that for most people in the Western world at least, the mass media is the primary way in which they acquire memories and ethical attitudes within contemporary culture.

Yet it remains very difficult to get across complex environmental and ethical messages around food security, much less Energy Transition - especially as it appears politically unacceptable to suggest that the global economy ought to shrink, in the struggle to become more environmentally sustainable and in using less carbon based energy sources for food production in the longer term. Most remain addicted to a form of 'affluenza' – unlimited wealth, affluence and expecting freely available electricity and cheap food – while embracing a more destructive form of conspicuous consumption that certainly does not stack up against the growing need for embracing environmental sustainability (Jamieson, 2012). Alternatively, calling for a stoical, resilient or frugal form of de-growth, alongside adapting a developmental model which supports lower working hours and counter-balancing our monetary fixated aspirations and replacing this with a more historically conceived and balanced production-consumption model, remains both difficult to visualise, much less promote on film (see Schor, 2010; Murray and Heumann, 2012; Retzinger et al., 2008; Ivakhiv, 2013; Rust et al., 2013; Smaill, 2014; Rust et al. 2016; Brereton 2016). Nonetheless, this transformation is badly needed and all forms of communications can assist in this process of transformation.

### **Methodology/Duration**

I wish to make a number of visits abroad during my sabbatical from September 2017 to end of August 2018 to carry out a number of audience studies and replicate a number of methodological strategies I've developed over the years since my PhD and subsequent research in Dublin City University. These strategies include:

- teasing out the range of stories/narratives that speak to all aspects of environmental sustainability and Climate Change, while exploring how they set up productive 'creative imaginaries' and at the same time deal with dissensus and possible fallout in addressing these global challenges. Building on the corpus of media narratives already developed within my research agenda (Brereton 2005; 2012; 2016), this corpus will be extended to help underpin future publications.

- setting up a number of focus groups and designing questionnaires and other empirical methodologies to gauge audience responses, including teasing out the broad range of attitudes, values and beliefs around environmentalism, as well as highlighting typical behaviour patterns around these global challenges. For instance this study will draw on the research exercises developed at a European COST summer school in Ireland [Landscape and Alternative Energies Sept 2016] which involved 20 PhD students from a broad range of disciplinary boundaries, including Geography, Social Science, Architecture and Engineering. I continue to adapt research tools including Content and Textual Analysis, as well as more recently evaluating audience responses using stakeholder interviews, focus groups and applying Q-Methodology to help sift through a growing research literature in Environmental Communication.

- I will drill down into a number of ethnographic case studies around alternative energy, alongside examining sustainable food and farming practices, to evaluate the impact of such transformational practices on conflict/consensus across communities and other stakeholders.

- Interviewing key stakeholders within environmental organisations, as well as carrying out more broad-based discussion groups with environmental scholars and examining audience responses that will help build towards a comparative appreciation of the field. This will also be used in the future to suggest policy recommendations for key stakeholders, including Environmental NGO's, Governmental agencies and Media Producers, who are mandated to produce environmental content.

- To carry out ongoing research with a range of key stakeholders, which will radically extend my findings using a range of comparative methodologies across these very diverse and interdisciplinary fields.

### **Significance**

The overall study draws on a number of core concepts and research strategies, and the preferred outcomes including:

- The need for new knowledge around *citizen engagement*.
- The need to develop media/citizen *environmental literacy*, drawing on a comprehensive range of cross-disciplinary areas including: social science, literary studies and arts practice, town planning, engineering, geography, environmental science, communications and other related areas of study. Finding a fresh language and an evolving mode of environmental literacy is essential to help inspire new generations to become critically engaged and responsive to the environmental challenges around the need to adopt radically innovative energy and food solutions for the future.
- Constructing a clear demonstration of the most productive and useful range of media approaches to energy transition and environmental sustainability generally, which in turn might provide a *road map* for innovation at all levels.

Producing case studies and evidence of *best practice* in audio-visual mediated fictional and documentary environmental narratives. Teasing out the environmental communication challenge in general, while taking into account the complexity of Energy Transition remains a core preoccupation of this study. Furthermore, increasing understanding and appreciation of the different scenarios and rationales embedded within sustainable agriculture, alongside low-carbon transition narratives, can be distilled to facilitate engagement and public debate. Many for example favour the ‘Deliberative Democracy’ engagement model (Dryzek 2002), while committed to a mixed-methods approach, I would certainly not expect a ‘one size fits all’ response, much less appear to preach down to audiences with prescribed solutions. Many studies in fact show that a dogmatic strategy does not work, at least not on its own, in modifying behavior patterns. Essentially, my ongoing investigation will strive to contribute to and foster interest in the protection and enhancement of our natural and built environment, while focusing on how the audio-visual industries can catalyse a range of productive environmental transformations.

- Finally I will attempt to frame a template for a comprehensive *communications model* of environmental media production, to effectively engage citizens and encourage behavioral change, rather than simply reverting back to a ‘top-down’ and ‘scientific-deficit’ module approach to citizenship and in turn help proactively mediate debate between the various stakeholders and publics.

### **Evaluation and Dissimination**

As well as feeding into my contracted new book with Routledge (due September 2018) on *Environmental Literacy and Digital Audiences*, I will publish findings from this research study within broad-circulation media outlets, as well as producing a number of peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary and high-impact academic research articles for journals such as *Environmental Communication*, building on my latest book *Environmental Ethics and Film* (2016). These and other deliverables will be used to set up and expose how a radical transformation of economic, business, political and environmental practice can inspire more collegiate bridge-building across the academy, while drawing on inclusive environmental narratives, which feed off the ubiquitous power of the mass media to entertain and inform and hopefully influence citizens at all levels to actively deal with our climate change dilemmas.

Drawing on my recent monograph ‘Environmental Ethics and Film’ (2016), I would like to promote and contribute to the growing importance of eco-cinema studies by delivering a number of off-the-shelf master-classes and seminars featuring various chapters from this study as listed below:

- Core Filmic Readings of Environmental Ethics [From ‘classics’ like *An Inconvenient Truth*; *The Day After Tomorrow* to *Wall-E*; as well as recent films *All is Lost* and *Captain Phillips*].
- Indigenous Cultures and Ethical Food Consumption [*Avatar*, *Apocalypto* and *The Road*].
- Eco-feminism, Environmentalism and Science Fiction [*The Hunger Games*, *Gravity*, *Elysium*]
- Social Responsibility and Anthropomorphising Animals [*Fantastic Mr Fox*, *Grizzly Man*, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *Life of Pi*].
- Third World Injustice and Environmental Sustainability [*Koyaanisqatsi*, *The Constant Gardener*].
- Business Ethics and Environmentalism [*Wall Street: Money never Sleeps*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*].
- End of the World Scenarios and the Precautionary Principle [*Tree of Life*, *Melancholia*].
- Conclusions and Future Research

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