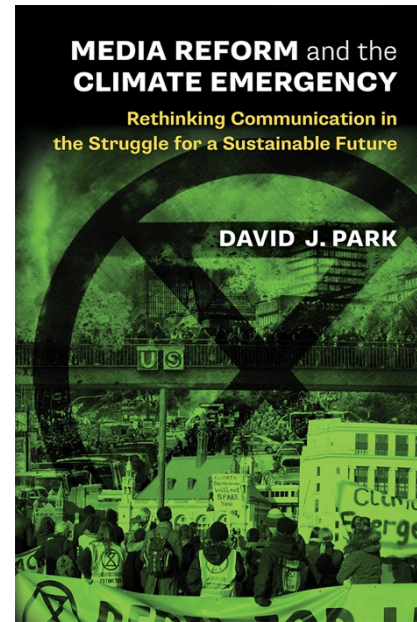


David J. Park, **Media Reform and the Climate Emergency: Rethinking Communication in the Struggle for a Sustainable Future**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021, 305 pp., \$75.00 (hardcover).

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Much scholarship on climate change and media has been undergirded by a desire to improve content to effect change. This has often—both within journalism and its scholarly study—been founded upon the belief that if scientific knowledge was “correctly” translated, we would all understand the gravity of the situation and act accordingly. While it is hard to argue against making journalism more nuanced, this approach has been challenged partly by arguments stating that framing climate change in scientific terms pushes aside important issues of social justice and partly by arguments stating that the “task is not so much making climate change real for people, but rather enabling a sense of efficacy, a belief that individual and collective action is possible and potentially effective” (Hackett, Forde, Gunster, & Foxwell-Norton, 2017, p. 7). In his far-ranging and welcomed book, **Media Reform and the Climate**



Emergency: Rethinking Communication in the Struggle for a Sustainable Future, Park goes in a different direction by (at least to some degree) shifting his focus from media content to media reform.

When Park discusses advertising—the key focus of the book along with journalism and digital media—he thus states that “the content of advertisements is mostly irrelevant to this book”; what is in focus instead is a “rethinking of the transactional and distributive aspects of advertising,” which “is the key to using advertising as a mitigative model” (p. 77). And this is, writes the author, because advertising is wedded to economic growth through consumption, and through this, the commercial news media and various Internet services are complicit in furthering nonsustainable developments. Obviously, production and consumption are intertwined, but Park argues that due to the infiltration of political and industry interests, it is, while preferable, very difficult to regulate production. “Regulating . . . advertising . . . could [thus] be an easier and useful alternative” (p. 84). Why this is so is not entirely clear, as one might assume that some of the same “political and economic forces opposed” (p. 83) to regulation of production would come into play if a key aspect of distribution was targeted politically.

The regulation Parks envisions for advertising is a fee model through which the price of advertising depends on the ecological footprints of the “material commodity . . . and service” (p. 84) being advertised. Implementing such a scheme, says Park, will influence both production and consumption in a more sustainable direction. This is indeed an alluring thought, which, however, necessitates a trusted regulatory system that can measure and record the ecological footprints of a range of products, including, for example, the “self-sufficiency” of production, the investment profile of the company, and “the percentage of

workers/employers/employees who use public transportation or collective transportation, or walk or bicycle to get to work" (p. 84). While these and other measures make sense, they point—in themselves and as the foundation of a complex system regulating the pricing of advertising—toward a bureaucratic nightmare.

But this would, says Park, not be more complicated than the "massive amount of regulation, testing, and enforcement needed to manage the legalization of marijuana" (p. 81). While this is doubtful—as the diversity of production and related modes of advertising call for very complex regulatory measures—such a construction may work. Yet, it still needs to get through legislative bodies. In this sense, media reform and media content are obviously connected. First, in the sense that reform is about structural changes with the aim of affecting content on an overall level and, second, as reforms of the magnitude argued by Park, are, as he writes, dependent on "a communication battle to convince the public about the immediate need to reform the way our societies are organized in order to address the crisis" (p. 22). One could here argue that Park merely shifts the communicative struggle from one area to another. And given how ingrained market ideologies are in the United States, this may indeed be a hard sell.

Yet, Park pushes even further by citing Naomi Klein (2018), who points out,

that countries with a strong democratic socialist tradition—like Denmark, Sweden, and Uruguay—have some of the most visionary environmental policies in the world. From this we can conclude that socialism isn't necessarily ecological, but that a new form of democratic eco-socialism, with the humility to learn from Indigenous teachings . . . appears to be humanity's best shot at collective survival. (p. 57)

As a citizen of Denmark, I am not really convinced our environmental policies are so visionary and calling them socialism or "ecosocialism" is indeed a far stretch. Be that as it may, it is interesting to note that while Park proposes a market-based advertising reform, he also (as above) includes a range of pointers to ecosocialism. Yet, while Park wants to move in that direction, it remains unclear what that means and/or entails: "So our program for ecosocialism or *whatever we would call it* must have at its center, for example, the genuine recognition of the sovereignty and treaty rights of the native peoples" (p. 19; emphasis added). While it is hard to disagree with the argument about recognition, it is difficult to see how this relates more specifically to media reform and, not least, to notions of socialism. I fully endorse Park's attempt to delineate a media reform that might bring us closer to a sustainable development. What is missing are more detailed discussions of how this will work and how feasible such reforms are, and this is—at various levels—highly dependent on their real or perceived affinities with socialism.

I have so far only discussed Park's ideas about advertising because I find these to be the most interesting parts of the book. The chapters on digital media and journalism are more focused on diagnoses than cures and are, in addition, largely summaries of other peoples' work. In relation to the broad category of digital media, Park draws on well-known discussions within political economy about the exploitative character of the digital economy. Many of these points are well-known, for example, that major digital platforms are deeply interwoven with more and more complex modes of advertising and that digital media in themselves have considerable carbon footprints. Given the main title of the book, one might have expected a greater focus on suggestions to reform this system (which, of course, is a daunting task).

Regarding environmental journalism, Park also makes a range of well-known arguments: the furthering of false balance by giving access to climate-change deniers, the difficulty of grappling with a highly complex issue, a decline in the number of journalists, the general “crisis” of journalism, and the strong opponent in the shape of industry misinformation. He also rightly calls attention to ways in which commercial news media are tied into the culture of capitalism and points out, among other things, that “the quantity of pro-consumption messages in commercialized media systems vastly outguns any messages that question the relationship between elevated levels of consumption and environmental degradation” (p. 149). In relation to this, it is, however, rather unclear what counts as “elevated levels of consumption” or, as Parks says in other places, “overconsumption” (p. 3). This is at some level linked to advertising and the media system but is also something deeply ingrained in culture(s), and the differences Park outlines between U.S. and European climate coverage are, arguably, linked to broader cultural differences undergirding different media systems. Working toward a “30 percent of the total market share . . . of community, public, and nonprofit media” (p. 189) may thus only go so far and is, in any case, a long-term project, which could also be said about the advertising model.

I do admire Park’s energy and optimism in his attempts to disentangle U.S. media practices from the cultural and social structures that undergird the environmental crisis. But while many of his analyses and ideas are interesting and suggestive, they are also put forward with a naïveté in terms of their feasibility and effects. While anything new must be formulated, I still lack a more coherent path. Following my comments above about a market model for advertising along with various pointers to ecosocialism, Park—like perhaps many of us—is caught between advocating for incremental change through reforms and pointing toward uprooting established structures in favor of a new beginning (some kind of ecosocialism). As such, his book is both too much—as it contains many interesting observations and ideas—and too little, as there seems to be no overall vision anchoring the diverse elements touched upon apart from the argument that capitalism and “overconsumption” have been and still are bad for the environment—which is hardly an innovative insight. But, again, given the complexity of the environmental crisis, such an impasse is probably something that many of us find ourselves in.

Reference

Hackett, R., Forde, S., Gunster, S., & Foxwell-Norton, K. (2017). Introduction: Journalism(s) for climate crisis. In R. Hackett, S. Forde, S. Gunster, & K. Foxwell-Norton (Eds.), *Journalism and climate crisis: Public engagement, media alternatives* (pp. 1–9). New York, NY: Routledge.