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Communicating
Sustainability
towards #2052

Climate protection and adaptation, sustainable development, “the good life,” and rules for justice and diversity are potential cultural innovations for the global survival of humankind.

How can we recount these changes so that, despite their inherent uncertainties, they are more convincing and more livable than today’s popular culture? Communication in this sense means telling the “great new story” about that intercultural humanity which, out of intelligence, responsibility and empathy, will achieve the great turnaround in the next fifty years.

For this “story of the future,” we need not only alternatives and development opportunities, but, just as much, metaphors, images and symbols. They can only emerge collaboratively, in participatory communications processes.

The booklet is a collection of audio-visual discussions of the issues of the transformation towards sustainable development. It is a compilation created in processes of design and communication in Chile, Brazil, Russia and Germany, involving communications experts, artists, web designers, environmental scientists, stakeholders and development experts.

It reflects search processes for symbols and metaphors, for media and formats, for “trans-media storytelling” – in short, for the great cultural transformation of sustainable development.

The quotes and text modules are a work in progress in this search for the appropriate forms for the communication of climate culture and the culture of sustainable development. It is a search for a new esthetics.

Editor: Joachim Borner

In discussion with Raul A. Montenegro (Alternative Nobel Prize), Mario Molina (Nobel Prize), Juan Pablo Orrego (Alternative Nobel Prize), Gregory Cohen, Carlos Flores, Ulrich Wünsch, Friedrich Hagedorn

Sustainable Development is development that „meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, as defined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. We are talking about needs such as achieving a satisfactory standard of living, and not just for a fraction of human population, but for the entire human race.

I want to use climate change as an example to further justify the need for sustainable development, since it is probably the most serious environmental challenge that society has ever confronted. Mario Molina

“What cannot be communicated does not exist in society” (Luhmann) – and when it gets communicated, it is communicated in various languages and with the varying interpretation sets of various subcultures. So if a new topic, such as sustainable development, seeks to occupy space, that will only be possible if its guiding ideas are publicly and continually reproduced in spoken images and metaphors, in rituals and visual symbols, capable of generating a response and of gaining legitimacy. If such an effort is successful, the idea will obtain public recognition and the power to structure action. In other words, the concept of sustainable development must constantly and symbolically stage its core guiding concept and anchor its spoken and visual forms of symbolism in public communications processes and dominant discourses.

We have arrived at the stage of a “culture of images.” Significant communications occur by way of complex, audiovisual media formats. Communications of sustainable development will also have to grasp these media and formats, especially that of Web 2.0, with their emotional and motivating potentials. In that context, they will not be able to avoid formulating new symbols, metaphors and esthetic elements, which both act against “knowledge-atheism and future-atheism” (Sloterdijk), and also become the basis for the “narratives” of sustainable development. These narratives come from the future – “for instance, what we formulated in 2052” – and describe what we have to start doing today in order to be able to create such a narrative of tomorrow, what we will gain from that, and which transformations we will have to undergo.

I consider communications a human right.

Margot Wallström

Of course, we don’t know whether world society will be able to deal with such complex challenges as climate change and demographic transformation, resource shortages, unfair distribution and lack of equal opportunities. But we do know that we’re going to find out what our opportunities for the future will be, and which “great narrative” our possible future will describe – if we succeed in communicating across cultural boundaries and in developing moderating forms of dispute and of controversy.

That controversy is understood to be the bearing communicating cultural technique for search processes within the “great transformative processes.”

“The question is: Will this transition come because we act and deliberately bring it down to processes which we consider to be politically and economically and ethically acceptable? Or will we continue to ignore the problems, and then the planet will force this growth to go down, but in ways which aren’t very pleasant?” (Meadows).

The controversy may not allow itself to be pacified or channelized by appeals for moderation, but must rather be carried out in such a way as to be participatory, involving all.

We deal with this world as if we had a second one in the trunk. Jane Fonda



Ever the same kind of communications won't work

What won't work is ever more of the same kind of communications. The global elites in the political, economic and media spheres have already tried that, with "more communications" and more PR. That has been the case at the Copenhagen COP at the Global Summits in Rio in 2012, and currently in Doha. However, they are ever less capable of conveying why they do things or refrain from doing them, and how. In order to change the upheaval we are currently undergoing into an upsurge toward a desired design of the future, we have to do more than just design – or communicate – "ready-to-eat" meals.

Whether conferences with 15,000 or more participants will be able to deal with that at all is the question. Rather, we will have to enhance substantive and communicative participation from below. As of COP 15, we know that an effective global management will require a different kind of management bodies than those which UN events have provided. Especially, we know that the time in which people had patience with their governments is starting to run out. "They told us the 21st century started on September 11, 2001, and that its basic topic would be security from terror. In fact, the 21st century began with the debacle of December 19, 2009 – and its basic topic is the failure of global governance." (Sloterdijk).

As a result, people will soon start "demanding security from their governments" (ibid.). They are no longer demanding simple supply, but rather participation with visible effectiveness. Responsible citizens are raising the demand to appropriate competences, with which they can live democracy in a practical sense. They see themselves ever less as the consuming public, but rather, or also, as producers and distributors of ideas as to how the future will permit us to not only survive, but in fact to live the good life – "buen vivir."

"The People Formerly Known as the Audience" (Jay Rosen) has moved into the place of the primarily consumer-oriented public of the mass media. Using the web as a platform, which Tim O'Reilly has stressed as the foundation of Web 2.0, applies an attitude and a manner of behavior characterized by openness and by a conviction of the value of the "wisdom of the crowds." The use of social media is not primarily technological and instrumental in character, but rather is a possibility for allowing communities, networks and new formats for the generation and exchange of knowledge to arise, formats which have not existed previously or outside the Web 2.0, and which now radiate into society.

These conferences don't bring about immediate changes, but forceful "screenplays" with legal validity, such as treaties, and "soft" guidelines, such as declarations and agendas. From this perspective they prove to be very useful. The mistake is to expect the world to be different after each conference.

What happened at Rio +20 ?

Firstly, and predictably, less than expected was obtained. This was logical against the background of the economic crises that affected important regions of the world. Secondly, the partnerships between NGOs and grassroots groups were improved once again, especially after the entry of great social movements to the scene which, supported by internet and social networks, challenge powerful government and corporate groups. Finally, the existence of new mechanisms of calling for action and of resistance based on virtual networks became evident. For the first time there was no need to necessarily be in Rio de Janeiro in order to actually participate in the summit or to multiply the participation of the civil society. Dr. Raul A. Montenegro