Wilderness conference session to focus on “legacy” of Edward Abbey. (1990, March 5). News release from Idaho Farm Bureau Federation. (Available from Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, P.O. Box 4848, Pocatello, ID.)

The Logic of Competing Information Campaigns: Conflict Over Old Growth and the Spotted Owl
by Jonathan I. Lange

As “the environment” has emerged as a predominant issue of the American scene, so have environmental advocacy and counter advocacy become a central political drama. *Time* magazine’s identification of the earth as “planet of the year” reflected the public’s concern with the increasing number and variety of interdependent ecological problems (Jaehne, 1990), particularly as the magnitude and consequences of environmental degradation, crisis, and policy-making itself became known. Nuclear accidents and waste disposal, air and water degradation, chemical and oil spills, ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect, species displacement and vanishing wilderness are only a small sample of the environmental concerns currently played out by assorted publics, interest groups, government agencies, and representatives in the theaters of American media, courts, and policy-making bodies.

Natural resource utilization is at center stage within the environmental drama; indeed, some scholars have argued that the perception of scarce resources is an essential—and therefore necessary—condition of any conflict (Coser, 1967; Hocker & Wilmut, 1991; Mack & Snyder, 1973). Since the economic health of so many communities depends on what are now dwindling natural resources, environmentalists, “counter-environmentalists” and government agencies continually clash over resource utilization, allocation, replacement, and depletion. Natural resource issues have achieved a special prominence in the pantheon of environmental concerns. Resource conflict has become a quintessential feature of the American political drama.
Discursive practices inherently determine the “social construction” of any environmental conflict (Schoenfeld, Meier, & Griffin, 1979). What humans say about the issues—even how the issues are defined—will determine interpretation, treatment, and outcome of the public debate (Carbaugh, 1991). As rhetorical and communicative processes mold decisions affecting generations of human and non-human species, thorough scrutiny by communication theorists and critics is warranted. Unfortunately, although analyses of environmental problems abound in sociology and other disciplines (Cantrill, 1990), few appear in communication journals. Fewer still specify natural resource conflict.

There are notable exceptions. Oravec provided one of the earliest contributions in her rhetorical criticism of preservationism (1981). Peterson offered a Burkeian analysis of “dust bowl rhetoric” (1986) and an essay on farmer’s resistance to conservation practices (1991). Media “packaging” of the Chernobyl accident drew an essay by Luke (1987). Waddell (1990) addressed the role of pathos in a policy-making process surrounding potentially hazardous recombinant DNA experiments. In 1990 I presented a cultural analysis of Earth First!, a radical environmental group known for their refusal to compromise (Lange). Short (1991) examined Earth First!’s agitative rhetoric. Risk communication with regard to incineration effects (Renz, 1992) and recycling behavior (Krendal, Olson, & Burke, 1992) was a recent object of inquiry. Analyses of “counter-environmental discourse” were provided by Huspek and Kendall (1991), who highlighted the political vocabulary of a speech community of lumber-industrial workers, as well as Williams and Treadaway (1992), who critiqued Exxon’s crisis communication after the Valdez oil tanker spill.

The more specific category of natural resource conflict was first addressed by Cox (1982), who focused on the rhetorical strategy of casting an environmental decision as “irreparably” harmful to resources. Oravec (1984) investigated an early national resource dispute—over the building of the Hetch Hetchy dam—as she criticized the different side’s arguments and how “the public interest” was differentially conceived. Peterson studied how institutional authority was constructed during a government hearing on wilderness designation (1988). Cantrill, in a multi-disciplinary review and categorization of research in environmental communication, went so far as to define environmental advocacy as symbolic discourse “aimed at supporting conservation and preservation of finite resources” (in press).

Thus, there has been limited but increasing attention paid to environmental and counter-environmental advocacy as our discipline applies theoretical principles to this critical arena. The increase may be due not only to the crucial nature of the topic, but to the fact that environmental and counter-environmental advocacy invoke other, larger, and variably constituted communication contexts (e.g., information campaigns, political communication, mass media, public address, social movements, and—especially in the case of resource conflict—dispute resolution).

Given the numerous contexts involved, the study of environmental advocacy should seek to achieve the status of a “sub-area” from which contexts can coalesce and communication theory can evolve (cf., Berger, 1991). Such achievement is aided by the research cited above, as well as the Speech Communication Association’s 1989 Seminar on Environmental Advocacy, its 1991 and 1993 conferences on Environmental Advocacy (Oravec & Cantrill, 1992) and its inclusion of environmental papers in its national and regional conventions. The current study explicitly attempts to merge contexts and build theory as it explores the communicative character of what is arguably the nation’s most wrenching natural resource conflict of the late twentieth century, what Lemonik has termed “the hottest battleground” in the country’s broader “environmental wars”: the dispute over old growth forests and the spotted owl (1989, p. 58).

This descriptive, qualitative case study examines a resource conflict in which advocates’ and counter-advocates’ rhetorical and communicative strategies mirror and match one another as disputants engage in a synchronous, spiral-like “logic of interaction.” Drawing from conversation analytic and systems theories, Pearce & Cronen (1980) and Pearce (1989) conceptualize interactions as having “logical force.” That is, when interlocutors in a communication system address each other, intending to influence each other, their utterances evoke—almost force—specific types of responses, while delegitimizing or even disallowing others. The interaction reported here differs from previous logic of interaction inquiry; this interaction is characterized by moves which, while communicative, are intended for just about anyone except the other party. As with other disputes, both environmentalists and industry representatives choose strategies that are dependent on and responsive to their antagonist. This analysis reveals how disputants’ interactive logic—a mirroring and matching of each others’ strategies—is achieved with little to no direct communication between parties. They learn of each others’ tactics primarily through the mass media as they pursue duplicate or antithetical rhetorical strategies with various audiences. The logic becomes evident in an examination of the two sides’ information campaigns, an area relatively neglected in the study of interactive logics.

Information campaigns are organized sets of communication activities intending to generate specific outcomes or effects in a relatively large number of people, usually within a specific time period (Rogers & Storey, 1987, p. 821). The information campaigns of timber and environmental groups are political, as opposed to marketing, public health or other types of campaigns. The current essay argues for application of the principles of interactive logics in future studies of political communication.

Previous researchers have alluded to mirroring, matching, and—relatedly—spiraling processes in studies of conflicting parties, finding a variety of communicative outcomes and patterns. In his seminal work outlining the course of both productive and destructive conflict, Deutsch wrote, “If each side in a conflict tends to perceive its own motives and behavior as more benevolent and legitimate than those of the other side, it is evident that conflict will spiral upward in intensity” (1969, p. 14). He showed how perceptions of benevolence and legitimacy facilitate a “negative spiral” of destructive strategies and tactics. Such perceptions additionally bias each side’s idea of what would be an equitable agreement and fair compromise since differential legitimacy should be differentially rewarded. Following Deutsch’s emphasis on perceptions, Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander (1987) examined a variety of actions and texts—primarily a debate between Senator Edward Kennedy and Reverend Jerry Falwell—and argued that the conflict between secular humanists and the New Christian Right was characterized by a process in which disputants’ beliefs were bolstered by their interpretations of the responses of the other side. This
led to a logic of interaction that the authors labeled a "reciprocated diatribe." "Each act by each participant elicited a louder, more shrill, and less informative response from the other; the interaction was quickly reduced to name-calling with a lot of emotion" (Pearce, 1989, p. 177). In discussions of interpersonal conflicts, Folger and Poole (1984) remarked how negative spirals can become self-perpetuating while Hocker and Wilmot (1991) argued that communication actually accelerates misunderstanding when contextualized in destructive escalatory spirals. Focusing on one set of texts from two competing information campaigns, Vanderford (1989) found the "parallel" use of "vilification" strategies. She analyzed newsletters of one "pro-life" and one "pro-choice" group, concluding that communication between the two was probably inhibited by the vilification rhetoric.

The conflict over old growth forests is shown here to evoke some of the above attributes and consequences—reciprocated diatribe, parallel vilification—as well as others. The current inquiry reveals a logic of interaction achieved with little to no direct communication between environmental and counter-environmental groups. The logic is instead revealed through the competing information campaigns, as each group mirrors and matches the other's communicative behavior across five categories. These categories are described below following sections on method and background. The essay concludes with a discussion of indirect interactive logics, particularly as they affect political and other communication contexts.

**Method**

In studying this conflict I followed qualitative data gathering techniques and field work recommendations offered by Glaser (1965), Lofland (1971), Spradley (1979, 1980), and Pearce (1989). I attempted to immerse myself in both environmentalist and counter-environmentalist (i.e., timber industry) culture in the three ways suggested by Lofland: through bodily presence, extensive interviewing, and examination of written materials. As part of an ongoing environmental research agenda, the fieldwork on which this essay draws occurred over four years. It included over 300 hours of direct participant observation of strategy and planning meetings, conferences, benefit concerts and events, political demonstrations, and other gatherings held by each side. I "hung out" at local environmental and timber industry offices and attended government hearings. I acted as moderator or facilitator on two occasions when representatives from both sides were present (during a public debate and at a meeting of national foresters). I was hired by a federal agency to analyze a "failed" experiment in collaborative forest management for a particular old growth basin; this involved 22 interviews with agency, environmental, timber and civic representatives. I also held six intensive interviews (Lofland, 1971) with informants, averaging 90 minutes per interview, and have "checked in" with four of these individuals on dozens of occasions, asking for their interpretation of various events. I informally interviewed dozens more. Since the primary focus of this study is the way the two information campaigns relate to each other, my examination of a wide range of artifacts was particularly important. These included: hundreds of local newsletters, press releases and miscellaneous publications written by representatives of each side; hundreds of articles reported by the Associated Press, United Press International, and local daily newspapers on timber issues and the spotted owl; dozens of analyses of old growth in the national popular "environmental press."

I attempted to structure my data gathering in such a way as to follow an interpretive/critical method designed to describe interaction between two conflicting groups (Pearce, 1989, p. 172-179). With this method, the qualitative researcher attends especially to the spiral-like "logic" that unfolds as each group interprets and responds to various acts and events (perhaps the previous response from the other party, perhaps a salient newsmaking occurrence). This type of communication inquiry investigates how the "original" interpretation and response elicits the other's interpretation and response, which then elicits another interpretation and response from the first party, and so on. However, as the fieldwork progressed, the relative lack of direct communication between groups moved me to add Glaser's "constant comparison method" (1965) as a supplementary procedure. While following Pearce's method revealed a synchronized logic, in which communicative tactics were opposite or mimicking each other, the lack of face-to-face communication made identification of specific and chronologically clear interpretations and responses infeasible. I thus turned to the constant comparison method to inductively generate categories into which the major tactics could be parsimoniously placed. This essay therefore pays less attention to chronological order of disputant interaction and more to communicative content and medium. This will become clear below as the tactics are reviewed.

In the pages that follow, I attempt where possible to use the language of industry or environmental group representatives. Those parts not referenced, particularly in the next section, are taken from interviews and in situ fieldwork or are conclusions drawn from daily newspaper reports. The five categories are not meant to be exhaustive or discrete. Following Glaser (1965), evidence is conveyed primarily by illustration and example. Some exemplars are shown to develop in chronological sequence; others do not indicate chronology.

**Background**

"Old growth" timber, located in what environmentalists call "ancient forests," has been the subject of increasing controversy for at least two decades, ever since environmental groups began efforts to reduce or prevent industry "clearcutting." Clearcutting—as opposed to selective cutting—is the most economically efficient method of logging timber since every tree is cut. However, a desolate and unsightly landscape of tree stumps and cleared brush is left behind; what was once a magnificent section of forest—a complex habitat for dozens of plant and animal species—is transformed into a barren spectacle. This transformation notwithstanding, the timber industry would have to lay off thousands of workers were it unable to continue clearcutting trees; communities and regions whose economy and social
that is, the owl would perish without old growth. Since the drastically dwindling number of owls was well documented (Sterling, 1989), environmentalists in 1986 sought its listing as a threatened or endangered species to both protect the owl and—not incidentally—to prevent ruination of the ecosystems upon which it depends, old growth forests. In 1987, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) denied the request. Twenty-six environmental groups sued. After months of expert testimony, political in-fighting, and intra-agency scandal involving suppression of evidence, the courts ordered the USF&S to reconsider the owl’s listing. In April of 1989 the agency changed its position; it proposed to list the owl as threatened. However, official listing could occur only after a period of further study, public comment, and biological assessment.

This seemed a great victory for environmental groups. It meant that at least some proposed auctions of timber from USFS and BLM old growth lands would now be enjoined by law since the lands constituted the habitat of a potentially threatened indicator species. However, the entire timber industry now brought its full might to bear on the controversy. Central to the economy of the affected geographical regions, and requiring a “steady and predictable” supply of old growth logs to survive without massive personnel layoffs and loss, members worked steadily to stave off economic damage to the industry and social turmoil in the timber-dependent regions.

The period between the proposal to list the owl and actual listing was thus characterized by intense debate, fervent lobbying, and congressional dealmaking. Both the industry and environmental groups waged extensive and intense information campaigns to gain the support of various groups and federal agencies, including the general public. The campaigns were marked by media depiction of demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, threats, and passionate rhetoric from both sides. Though occasional formal and informal events allowed for face-to-face interaction, negotiation, and attempted mediation, members of the industry and environmental groups rarely met in collaborative circumstances. The owl was officially listed in June of 1990.

A bevy of remaining issues sustains the competing information campaigns. Chief among them is how much and which old growth acreage should be set aside as owl habitat. Bitter controversy surrounds the agencies’ long-term forest management plans. Congress’s 1993 debate on reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act will refocus attention on old growth (as well as dozens of other natural resource conflicts). When making timber policy, the federal agencies and Congress will diligently attempt to assess and include the general public’s position. As the sympathetic chair of an influential congressional committee told one environmentalist, “I agree with you, but you have to get me more letters.” Despite a few recent signs of change, all of these occurrences indicate continuation of intense political communication designed to mobilize public support.

Mirroring and Matching

Analysis of the information campaigns as waged through 1992 shows how both timber and environmental groups used the same five major and overlapping
strategies as they mirrored or matched each other’s communicative behavior: (1) frame and reframe; (2) select high/low; (3) vilify/ennable; (4) simplify and dramatize; and (5) lobby and litigate. The term “matching” indicates communicative behavior that copies or repeats the other party’s strategy; “mirroring” describes communicative behavior that duplicates the other party’s tactic by presenting antithetical, polar or “mirror image” information. On occasion, parties engage in both processes, as is demonstrated below. The five categories themselves are in no way new; rather, they are simple constructions that describe the logic of interaction. They provide an understanding of the primary features of the information campaigns. The first strategy discussed, framing and reframing, shows how disputants attempt to contextualize the entire dispute.

Frame and Reframe

Across a wide variety of communicative forums—including newsletters, financial appeals, propaganda materials, press releases, interviews granted reporters, newspaper advertisements, television commercials, legal briefs filed, letters to congresspersons, and presentations to Rotary, Kiwanis, and like groups—each side frames issues (see Goffman, 1974; Salmon, 1989, pp. 24-28) in accordance with its particular ends. Facts, explanations, and interpretations are contextualized to discursively construct a reality favorable to one’s rhetorical goals. Frames are then predictably followed by a mirroring or matching strategy in which reality is reframed, by the other group, with an antithetical or oppositional context. Where it begins is, of course, a matter of arbitrary punctuation.

Representative examples will illuminate this category. The first involves mirroring and matching moves that focus on economic and employment issues such as lumber mill shutdowns, the resulting loss of jobs, and retraining displaced forest products workers for alternate vocations. In media cited above, environmental groups acknowledge the pain of transition, yet suggest it is inescapable: Old growth is finite; we will eventually run out; it is now time to acknowledge the inevitable reduction of timber-related work. They further argue that the problem of timber supply stems primarily from poor planning, decades of “overcutting,” and increasingly sophisticated logging and milling technology. They note that increasing timber harvests have been accompanied by a decreasing work force throughout the 1970s and early 1980s—all prior to any effects of the spotted owl controversy; the bird is “only a scapegoat.” They attempt to create a context in which the timber industry is framed as destroyers of the forest, out to get the last bit of old growth. They argue that the trend in work force reduction will continue inevitably as an effect of technology even apart from timber supplies. “I think the jobs issue is tragically irrelevant. . . . The jobs aren’t going to be around that much longer anyway. . . . We won’t have these jobs for our children, so let’s slow [logging] down now” (quoted in Freeman, 1992, p. 1A). Environmentalists point out that if the industry really cared about its workers, owners would be helping with retraining efforts instead of fighting the inevitable.

An antithetical frame—or reframe—is offered by timber industry supporters at every opportunity. They attempt to make jobs the primary issue. Overcutting is sometimes acknowledged, yet they portray trees as “a renewable resource.” The owl is to blame for supply problems and mill closure. They suggest that advanced technology is “only a scapegoat” in explaining jobs lost: “Automation never closed a mill. Lack of logs will close mills” (quoted in Zacorelli, 1991, p. 1). Timber workers accuse environmentalists of trying to ruin their communities. They scoff at suggestions that they give up a way of life that their fathers and grandfathers enjoyed. “Working in the woods or a mill, trucking logs, well, that can hardly be replaced with a minimum wage tourism job. And those computer jobs everyone talks about—do I look like I’m cut out for a desk job?” It’s easy for them to say, “Stop logging, but I’ve got a family to feed.” The industry works diligently to press the jobs issue in nearly every discussion while environmentalists attempt to reframe it with equal fervor.

Three additional and representative examples further illustrate the framing and reframing process. In these cases, industry and environmentalist representatives match each other’s moves with mirrored content as they react to news reports. (For brevity’s sake, frames and reframes are indicated but not fully detailed.) In 1990, a press-announced “new environmental agenda” by the U.S. Forest Service was followed with: “[E]nvironmentalists are reacting with skepticism, calling the new agenda a ‘public relations ploy,’ and a timber industry association says the logging restrictions are too tough” (Grubb, 1990, p. 3). When a Bush administration task force announced a likely reduction in 1991 timber sales, the executive director of the American Forest Resource Alliance called the plan “unbalanced” in favor of “environmental special interests” (“Owl backers,” 1990, p. 1A); the vice president of the Wilderness Society was moved to say the proposal was “a dismal display of politics over science and an attempt to undermine the Endangered Species Act and other federal laws that protect the environment” (Lamar, 1990, p. 1). Immediately following the 1992 Forest Service announcement of its plan to protect the owl (later rejected as inadequate by a federal judge), a timber representative offered this to the press: “We are extremely disappointed that the Forest Service has placed the spotted owl before tens of thousands of Pacific Northwest families” while an environmentalist spokesperson said, “This is completely inadequate. . . . This clearly can’t stand on the grounds of being a credible plan for the owl.” (“Forest Service adopts Thomas plan,” 1992, p. 1). These frames or reframes represent hundreds of similar reactions, as offered to the press or in other media. They are further advanced and bolstered as both groups employ a second strategy, selecting high or low.

Select High/Select Low

In the contest to win public opinion, each side selects studies, “expert opinion,” and interpretations of each that offer numbers that promote its point of view. Hardly a new process to the American political scene, sides select high or low numbers in accordance with their rhetorical ends while simultaneously and synchronistically rejecting the other side’s offerings. Two representative though remarkable cases are offered here. The first concerns the potential number of jobs lost from mill closure. In a wide variety of public forums, timber industry representatives cite
sources that herald catastrophic numbers of job loss. When environmentalists are forced to deal with numbers of jobs lost, they present contradictory information in which numbers are minimized. A deputy undersecretary in the Department of the Interior, acting as coordinator of a government task force developing plans for the owl’s recovery, complained: “We’ve had studies [reported to us] over the past year with job losses ranging from 14,000 to 102,000 jobs” (Durbin, 1991, p. D2). The range is actually wider: “The Wilderness Society has portrayed the risk at only 12,000 jobs. At the other extreme, the industry-sponsored American Forest Resource Alliance placed the risk at more than 147,000 jobs” (Kadera, 1992, p. E5).

A second illustration involves the very definition of old growth forest itself—and therefore, the amount actually remaining. There are a number of definitions of old growth, ranging from the broadest (mature timber not yet cut) to the most narrow (an area with trees 200 years or older, 32 inches or larger in diameter with specific types and amounts of trees, tree canopies, and downed trees per acre). Environmentalists and industry groups offer different definitions depending on the purpose at hand. For example, if environmentalists want to demonstrate how little old growth is left and, therefore, especially precious, they use the narrow, more restrictive definition; if, however, they want to argue that large sections of old growth forest and spotted owl habitat must be off limits to logging, they employ a broad, inclusive one. Of course, the reverse scenario is true for the industry.

Similar processes of selecting high or low occur with nearly every other aspect of the controversy. Citing different sources, groups offer different counts on the number of owls remaining, the acreage of national lands already protected from logging, the amount of Pacific Northwest lumber needed by the nation, the success rate of tree replanting efforts, and other numerical “facts” that can be differentially found or interpreted. Each group points to the other’s “misuse” of these facts as evidence of their villainous nature.

Vilify/Ennoble

In her case study of pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric, Vanderford (1989) outlines four forms and functions of vilification as a rhetorical strategy. They include formulating specific adversarial opponents, casting them in an exclusively negative light, attributing diabolical motives to them and magnifying their power. All four forms and functions are present in the environmental conflict. The counterpoint to vilification is also present, as environmentalists and timber advocates ennoble their own cause and motives. Taken together, this creates a mirror effect in which each side castigates the other while proclaiming its own virtue. The following perspectives, claims, and ad hominem arguments are illustrative as they recall Pearce et al.’s (1987) “reciprocated diatribe,” the self-perceived greater “benevolence and legitimacy” articulated by Deutsch (1969) as well as Vanderford’s description of “vilification” rhetoric.

In an industry with a volatile union-management history, the current internal solidarity owes some to management success in framing environmentalists as devil figures, particularly radical environmental groups like Earth First! The majority of workers and owner-operators now view environmentalists as “radical preservationists” who want to “lock up the forests” preventing their “wise use” (“Environmentalists reject,” 1990, p. 2A). These “so-called environmentalists” are actually “eco-terrorists” (“Timber task force,” 1990, p. 3) using “raw generalizations, bum science, and half truths” (quoted in Macomber, 1990, p. D1) in creating conditions that will “be the death of many [Pacific Northwest] communities” (“Conservationists seek help,” 1989, p. 8). Workers and owners both depict national environmental groups as wealthy, highly organized, outside “obstructionists” who should leave decisions about Pacific Northwest resources to those who live here; “enviros” are “East Coast carpetbaggers trying to tell us our economy is going to have to transition” (quoted in Manny, 1990a, p. 3A)). One informant, an owner of a struggling lumber company, told me that, “We can solve this conflict, but only if we keep it local” [emphasis added].

Many in the environmental community believe that the intent of the owners in particular is, as one informant said, to “take every last possible stick while the taking is still good.” Pacific Northwesterners are being duped by an industry of “timber beasts” who, like the coal barons of Appalachia, will ruin the landscape and long-term economy after depleting the natural resources. The view of environmentalists is perhaps best represented in a local newspaper opinion piece that said:

The timber side is headed by a few giant corporations with almost unlimited resources, highly unified and closely associated with other large companies, including perhaps newspapers and television stations. The environmental side consists of a loose coalition of volunteer labor, not very unified or very well organized. (Cook, 1989, p. 15A)

An environmental informant told me that their best hope was to nationalize the issue:

People in the East think national forests are like national parks and will remain untouched. They need to know that these forests are being destroyed. Then they need to write letters and complain. This is the only way we can fight an insensitive multi-million dollar industry.

As each group vilifies the other, so too does each side ennoble itself. Both sides claim they have “compromised”; both hold that “science” favors their position; both imply “morality” and “the common good” as their guiding forces (see Freeman, Littlejohn, & Pearce, 1992). Environmental groups point out that since only 10 percent of the nation’s original old growth forests are left, to compromise on that paltry amount is to employ an unfair starting point. That is, a true compromise is impossible, since 90 percent has already gone to timber interests (Lange, 1990). Timber groups argue that millions of acres of potentially harvestable timber are now “locked up”; it is they who have compromised, now to the point of economic ruin. Similarly, when a federally appointed panel of scientists advised a significant reduction in timber harvests in order to save the owl from extinction,
environmental supporters referred to the group as “our very best scientists” and
“the bluest of blue ribbon committees” (Sonner, 1990b, p. 4A). Timber groups
labeled the report “bull science” maintaining that the public is not learning the true
“science of forestry” (Hill, 1990, p. 7). Finally, inferences about moral ends and
the common good are made by both groups. The industry claims to be saving jobs
as well as a way of life that spans generations. One industry leader marched in a
pro-timber demonstration to call attention to the nation’s growing number of
homeless, connecting the harvesting of timber and milling of lumber to the need
for additional housing. Environmentalists maintain they are preserving nature for
our children’s children. One environmentalist told me that, “History will
eventually show that we were the heroes of our generation.” Another says, “Envi­
rionmentalists make great ancestors.” Such images and slogans are characteristic of
the third category as well, simplify and dramatize.

Simplify and Dramatize

A third mirroring and matching dynamic entails the simplification and dramatiza­
tion of an issue of staggering complexity. Sproule’s (1988) comparison of the
old and new rhetorics provides two applicable constructs. He describes self-con­
tained slogans as the “persuasive staples” of the new rhetoric—as compared to the
enthralling operation of the old. He further postulates images in new rhetorics
as replacing the world of ideas common to the older suasion. Zarefsky (1992) argues
that American audiences find complexity “unbearable” and that we “simplify what
can not be avoided” (p. 412). These arguments are borne out in the two information
campaigns as simple, easily absorbed, and dramatic images and slogans are
substituted for analysis or explanation of phenomenally complicated issues.

Other than the images and slogans, there is little simple about the spotted owl
conflict. Interrelated and inordinately complicated biological, economic, social,
and political issues defy assimilation. John Turner, the head of the USF&WS, said
the spotted owl is “one of the most complex resource issues in this nation’s history”
(Baum, 1990, p. 1). The USFS has been described by agency supervisors as
“overwhelmed by change,” and “out of control” (Robertson, 1990, p. 1A) in part,
at least, because of this complexity. A federal judge, commenting on one of the
lawsuits, said that, “This is the most complicatedly [sic] presented issue I have ever
seen” (“Judges ponder,” 1991, p. 1A.) Both groups’ selective use of high or low
numbers is at least partially enabled by an overwhelming abundance of figures. It
seems impossible to differentiate between the “thousands” or “millions” or “bil­
lions” of revenue dollars lost or generated, or directly or indirectly affected jobs,
of board feet milled or not milled, of board feet sold in the U.S. or exported, of
profitable or below-cost timber sales, of current or lost wilderness acres, of private
versus public acres, of reforested or spotted owl habitat acres or habitat conserva­
tion acres and so on. The jargon and endless acronyms further confuse. Budgets
and service levels of federal, state, county, and local government agencies are
substantially affected by timber sales. In 1990, a biologist warned that, “At this
point, we are just looking at the tip of the iceberg with the spotted owl,” since
science will reveal further complications and ecosystem relationships (Sonner,
1990a, p. 3A). By 1991, the USF&WS was grappling with the extraordinary
implications flowing from the listings of newly identified endangered species,
including—in the Pacific Northwest—the sockeye salmon and the marbled murre­
let.

Yet disputants work to simplify the issues so that they may be dramatized for
mass consumption. The timber industry has at least partially succeeded in creating
an “owls versus people” scenario in the media. Time magazine ran an eight-page
cover story entitled, “Owl vs. Man,” with photographs inside of an owl opposite a
logger (Gup, 1990). The Wall Street Journal wrote that the issue “sets about 1,500
pairs of spotted owls against the people who make their living cutting down trees
in the Pacific Northwest” (quoted in “Other Editors Say,” 1990, p. 15A). Timber
supporters and U.S. Senators Hatfield, Packwood, and Gorton are repeatedly
quoted on the forced choice between people and owls. For example, Gorton of
Washington said that, “The difference between 2,000 pairs of owls and 1,425 pairs
is not worth the loss of 30,000 jobs, the dislocation of rural families, and the
destruction of small communities in often neglected parts of our state” (Sonner,
1990b, p. 4A). Environmentally inclined senators attempt to simplify, reframe, and
dramatize the problem as one of mismanagement by federal agencies, the leaders
of which were appointed by then-President Bush. One environmental group offered
a slogan on each of its mailings: “It’s not about owls.”

The owls versus people sloganizing is only one example of simplification and
dramatization. As the two groups “struggle for novelty” (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988),
attempting “photogenic discord” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, p. 19),
they intentionally create additional images and slogans for mass audience con­
sumption. Environmentalists drew television and photojournalist attention by camping
on platforms placed high in old growth trees; others demonstrated at USFS offices,
wearing owl costumes while carrying signs bemoaning loss of habitat. The industry
held “counter-demonstrations,” during which thousands of loggers and log truckers
rallied in Northwest cities, driving through lumber towns with industry-symbol
yellow ribbons attached to limbs, hard hats, and belts. They wore tee shirts and
displayed bumper stickers offering phrases like “I Like Spotted Owls . . . Fried,”
and “Save a Logger, Eat an Owl.” Environmental groups countered with slogans like
“Owls Don’t Destroy Forests, People Do,” and “Save an Owl, Educate a
Logger.” “This Family Supported by Timber Dollars” was later mirrored with “This
Family Supported by Intact Ecosystems.” As environmentalists promoted the
phrase “ancient forests,” timber groups warned of turning “mill towns into ghost
towns.” Environmentalists renamed an industry-approved owl “preservation plan”
to the owl “extinction plan.” When a congressman from Indiana sponsored a bill
(which eventually failed) to end all logging of old growth, an Oregon congressper­
son proposed turning one and 1.3 million acres of rural Indiana into a national park
(Manny, 1990b). Perhaps the ultimate matching behavior in the simplification and
dramatization category was the petition actually submitted by the Washington
Contract Loggers Association to the Department of the Interior seeking declar­
ation of loggers as a threatened species (“Loggers seek species,” 1990).
Members of both groups acknowledge the “low-level” nature of these public appeals. When I discussed this simplification and dramatization analysis with one informant—he could have been from either side—he said, “The process of raising public awareness is not centered on trying to educate the public about the details of the problem as much as it is on making the public aware that there is an injustice which needs their attention.” Both groups hold workshops on “dealing with the media” in which participants practice delivering “sound bites.”

Departure from the simplification/dramatization strategy occurs when audiences are perceived as better informed; in these cases there is often detailed, rich and more straightforward discussion. One such context includes antagonists’ internal communication forums, such as meetings, conferences, newsletters, and interpersonal encounters, where simple and dramatic communication is accompanied by more complex, straightforward discussion. As Pearce notes, “Discourse within various groups in society is usually richer than that between groups (1989, p. 43). But those media are less a part of the two information campaigns and less a part of an interactive logic than two additional sites. It is in the litigation and lobbying arenas where more sophisticated audiences evoke more sophisticated rhetoric.

Lobby and Litigate

Both groups believe that the most serious theaters for the conflict are in the courts and Washington, D.C. There is intense, extensive, and sustained lobbying of members of Congress who might eventually author or support various bills. Both groups prepare and file lawsuits and appeals that ask the courts to change unfavorable decisions by an agency (i.e., USFS, BLM, USF&WS) or lower court. While lobbying and litigation processes reflect many of the rhetorical strategies discussed above, they additionally constitute what both groups view as the ultimate culmination of the information campaigns. Each process has a distinct set of attributes and rules.

Both groups have office space in the nation’s capital, replete with full-time staff, media consultants and the latest office technology. The “Western Ancient Forest Campaign” is “networked” with the major national environmental groups (“The Big Ten”) and many “local” or “grassroots” environmental groups in the Northwest. The American Forest Council, part of the “wise-use movement,” coordinates with oil, coal, and other natural resource extraction industries as well as local grassroots timber groups. In both camps, staffers do their own lobbying and support lobbying efforts from visiting Northwesterners. At both offices, pamphlets provide information on “face-to-face lobbying,” such as whom to visit, how to dress, and what to talk about. Materials to take home instruct supporters on how to hold demonstrations, conduct “outreach” and phone campaigns, what to say when making phone calls, and how to write the most effective letters to congresspersons and local newspaper editors.

While litigation used to be the sole province of environmental groups, recently, lumber companies and timber associations have matched the strategy, filing appeals that challenge timber inventory accuracy, clarity of guidelines, and even use of indicator species to test the health of a forest (e.g., “Umpqua forest plans,” 1990). “We’ve gone to school on the way environmentalists use the courts,” said an executive director of a timber association. Environmental groups continue filing appeals of agency plans; their appeals are based on violation of the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, or the National Forest Management Act. And as environmentalists file lawsuits against private companies for alleged illegal logging, timber companies sue environmentalists for economic loss sustained during “downtime” caused by demonstrations at logging sites. Both sides carefully choose from dozens of potential issues for suit or appeal, as they are costly and time-consuming processes. Gain and loss are measured not only by the outcome of the issues in question, but by favorable or unfavorable publicity as well, showing the connection between these processes and the overall information campaign for public opinion.

Discussion

After delineating the background of one of America’s most contentious natural resource disputes, this study described five communicative strategies in which conflicting parties’ logic of interaction was reflected in synchronistic mirroring and matching behavior. The following addresses the theoretical implications and future directions of these explorations.

Beyond the description, this essay offers two theoretical contributions, both related to the nature of the communication relationship between the two parties. The first, revealed only through macro-analysis of the two competing information campaigns, stems from the fact that while these antagonists seldom address each other, their communicative behavior has its own peculiar logic. Previous research into the logic of interaction in other conflicts similarly revealed “reciprocated” or “parallel” behavior that resembled an “escalating negative spiral.” These studies, reviewed above, focused on interpersonal encounters or a small subset of information campaign texts. Through comprehensive analysis of the entire campaigns of both groups, the current inquiry finds a logic of duplication and antithesis, a matching and mirroring, more like a synchronous spiral of non-interaction, as messages are directed not to each other, but to the public and members of government and government agencies. There is so little face-to-face interaction, one might ordinarily conclude that each group’s communicative behavior has little to do with the other, with the obvious exception of preventing the other from achieving its goals. Yet both parties base communicative tactics on the predicted or previous moves of the antagonist. By examining the two competing information campaigns of this conflict, we find a logic of interaction between two groups who rarely communicate with each other.

Parties learn of each other’s communicative moves through indirect means, usually the mass media, supporting the contention that media are “relayed upon increasingly to let members of concerned groups know what ... the opposition is doing and thinking” (Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue, 1989, p. 139). At least a large
part of what the opposition is doing and thinking in this case is plotting how to respond to the other group. The interactive, interdependent, and almost symbiotic nature of the disputants was revealed as I listened to their internal discussions that so often focused on responding to, anticipating, or copying the other’s moves. A recent meeting of one environmental group was held to determine whether or not they should “counteract the effects of” an industry-produced television commercial with one of their own in order to “set the record straight.” Of course, the industry engaged in similar kinds of deliberations, as when they so often discussed, for example, how to respond to environmentalist lawsuits and appeals.

The second theoretical contribution is offered within the larger context of American political communication. Derived again through macro-analytic focus on the logic of competing information campaigns, the particular logic described here—mirroring and matching—implies a new framework for analyzing contemporary political communication. In a recent Communication Monographs Chau-tauqua, Swanson offered that “thousands of pages of scholarly work” make it clear that matters of public and political interest are routinely “oversimplified, personalized, trivialized, and dramatized” (1992, p. 397); Bennett contended that the nature of contemporary political dramas threaten the vitality of democracy (1992, p. 403); while Zarefsky argued that we have “debased” political debate (1992, p. 412). A number of insightful explanations (and remedies) are offered, yet there is little mention of how competing information campaigns interact. That the timber and environmental campaigns either match or mirror the other advances an additional explanation for understanding why it is so difficult for campaigns to rise above the current state of affairs: their co-created systems preclude it.

As noted earlier, Pearce (1989) describes logics of interaction to have assorted “senses of obligation” (p. 40); parties are compelled to respond to each other in ways determined by the system they constitute. The system is the best explanation for itself; a specific communicative act by one interlocuter practically “forces” a predetermined response by the other. Parties become locked into a systemic, self-reinforcing, patterned, and repetitive practice. With the exception of the current case, this type of analysis has not been applied to entire political information campaigns. Yet such a dynamic is clearly present here. For example, if one group vilifies the other, it is incumbent on the other to respond, refuting the charge and/or providing one’s own. When timber representatives frame the major issue as job loss, environmentalists must attempt to reframe it; otherwise, a fully unfavorable context, from their point of view, would prevail. If one party neglected to lobby or litigate, the other party’s practices in these areas would transform the entire conflict. The consequences of not mirroring or matching one’s antagonist are untenable. Bantz (1981) showed how in one notably different but nonetheless controversial public argument, proponents favoring a ban on saccharin failed to match the dramatic and less scientific arguments of their opponents, and consequently failed to win the battle of public opinion. All of this is to suggest that the sorry state of political communication as reflected in information campaigns may partially obtain from a co-created sense of constraint, necessity, and logical force. Political communication campaigns may result more from a logic co-created with the competing candidate or group than the audience or other exigencies.

This essay has attempted to illuminate the character of natural resource disputes and contribute to theory by merging several contexts of communication inquiry—information campaigns, political communication, logics of interaction, and dispute resolution. It is hoped that future work will explore other competing political information campaigns in light of their logics of interaction, direct or otherwise. While this essay does not seek generalizable propositions, and while elements of the five categories have been previously noted—though perhaps in isolation or in different forms—it seems likely that the properties described above may typically obtain in the information campaigns of other disputes, particularly those over natural resources and those political in nature. Future investigations of oil, coal, natural gas, geothermal, various metal, and other resource extraction controversies might reveal similar logics with additional attributes. Descriptions of political candidate campaigns might reveal logical forces of different strength. If parties who create American political information campaigns are somehow locked into an inherently flawed system from which they retreat only at their peril, we have indeed reached the crisis in political communication about which Zarefsky (1992) warns.

Notes

1. Though some timber industry representatives and supporters would object to its application, I respectfully take the term “counterenvironmental” from the work of Richard Gale (1986). Recent journalistic analyses of the fast-growing “anti-environmental” or “wise-use” movement can be found in Byrnes (1990), Hennelly (1992), or Poole (1992). It should be noted here that neither “environmentalist nor “timber industry” is a monolithic entity. For example, the “Ancient Forest Alliance” is an umbrella organization for 80 environmental groups. The timber industry has as many or more specific organizations.

2. More than 500 species in the 50 states are listed as endangered or threatened, including, in some states, “charismatic” species like the bald eagle, the grizzly bear, the wolf, and the mountain lion. However, while most of the 500 are plant species, the entire total represents only about 15 percent of the native species believed to be nearing extinction. “As many as three hundred species probably have gone extinct while either on the list or awaiting listing—and the current backlog is estimated at more than 3,800” (Watkins, 1991, p. 8).

3. The information campaigns did begin undergoing partial transition by the 1992 November elections. Candidate Clinton’s promise of a “Timber Summit,” along with the relative success of environmentalist litigation, altered some elements of the campaigns. For example, in preparation for what they termed the “Forest Summit,” environmentalists began inviting some forest product labor groups to some of their meetings. Similarly, by early 1993, timber representatives were offering, for just about the first time, some conciliatory statements about the conflict. When President Clinton’s “Forest Conference” was eventually held in April 1993, each side offered occasional acceptance of certain elements within the other’s position.

Works Cited


Constructing Irreconcilable Conflict: The Function of Synecdoche in the Spotted Owl Controversy

by Mark P. Moore

During the past two decades the American timber industry has engaged in a war of words with environmentalists over the destiny of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest. "What we have in the Northwest today," observes Jim Geisinger, president of the Northwest Forestry Association, "is absolute chaos and confusion" that is casting "an incredibly dark cloud over the stability and predictability of the future" (Barnard, 1992, p. C6). While both groups heighten confusion with conflicting "facts," they also construct competing social realities with opposing rhetorical tropes. Most recently, the controversy over proper forest management has come to the forefront of public consciousness through two divergent, synecdochic constructions of the spotted owl, as an "indicator" species by environmentalists and an economic "scapegoat" by the timber industry. While each group attempts to disarm the other with their own synecdochic form of the owl, these tropes prevent resolution and maintain controversy by becoming issues in and of themselves.

This essay examines the spotted owl controversy as a public argument rooted in conflicting owl synecdoches that conceptualize competing social realities, and argues that social construction of the owl in divergent synecdochic forms generates irresolvable conflict. Though social conflict can only be managed and framed with rhetorical tropes, there are flaws in both synecdoches that negate the resolution of this controversy. By applying Burke's (1969) view of synecdoche, and extending McGee's (1980a) concept of the ideograph to views expressed in synecdochic form, this essay shows how rhetorical tropes manage, articulate, and maintain conflict too threatening to resolve. It also offers a unique critical perspective on the dual, contradictory function of such symbolizing in public controversy.