CROSSING THE CHASM WITH COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

In developing a global eco-community, communication is a key lever, as people adopt new ideas for different reasons and in different ways. Just like early markets and mainstream markets are different from each other in adopting products, also innovative and visionary actors in the field of sustainable lifestyles are different from the mainstream actors, who should also be involved in change. This difference creates a risk of a chasm in the flow of adoption of new ideas. To build a global eco-community, a more sustainable lifestyle should become mainstream. In striving toward this, it is important to see that most people act as pragmatists in adopting new ideas and that communication between different actors influences how panarchic systems change.

Keywords: chasm, communication, eco-community, innovators, lifestyle, mainstream, marketing, sustainability, panarchy, pragmatists, visionaries

CROSSING THE CHASM WITH COMMUNICATION

In a situation where many people need to adopt a new idea, the question is basically one of systemic change. Either we need to change the lifestyle of a planetful of people, or else quickly generate approximately two other fully functioning Planet Earths to support the current lifestyle of our species. The lifestyle of a planetful of people is not a single one that could be precisely defined. Yet, the sum of actions that make up human lifestyle as a system is known to be destructive to the environment.

Holling's heuristic panarchy model (Holling, 2001) can help to grasp some of the characteristics of human lifestyle. Human lifestyle could be understood as a slower cycle in a panarchy of different speeds and sizes of faster cycles that together form this slower cycle. "Transformational cycles take place in nested sets at scales ranging from a leaf to the biosphere over periods from days to geologic epochs, and from the scales of a family to a sociopolitical region over periods from years to centuries" (Holling, 2001, 392).

Holling's model demonstrates how a system is always in constant internal change, moving in adaptive cycles from a conservation phase towards a reorganization phase and back again. Systems form panarchies by interacting with each other, and all of this is in constant pulsating movement like ecosystems in nature, changing the rhythm of the parts and the whole due to internal and external changes. A panarchy system is a combination of conservative and reorganizational forces. (Chart 1)
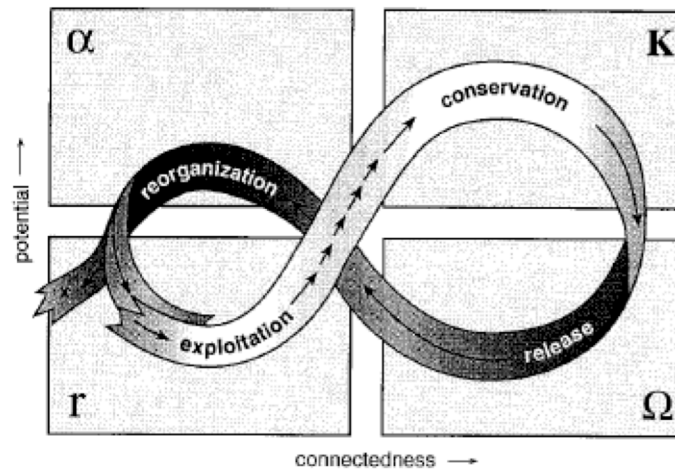
Chart 1. Holling, 2001: Adaptive cycle in panarchy.

A panarchy is formed by several adaptive cycles that range in size and duration.

The human lifestyle consists of smaller parts, or faster cycles of panarchies that have emergent properties that belong to no part alone. Together these evolve into something larger. This kind of emergence has already occurred at the point where separate lifestyles have been transformed into larger, slower cycles that seem to determine the behavior of large numbers of people – such as the phenomenon of consumerism. Holling states that while human systems have the same kind of self-organizing patterns as ecosystems that have developed over time, they also possess the unique ability to communicate ideas and experience that can become shared cultural myths, legal constitutions and laws. Holling also points out that "many sources of information – television, movies, the internet – are contributing to a transformation of culture, beliefs and politics at global scales" (Holling, 2001, 401).

How does this contribution to transformation happen? Information is transferred through communication at many levels. Mass media can set the public agenda (McCombs, 2004) and influence our minds incrementally. The power of marketing and advertising in changing the behavior of people is well known. Education in general can both create the basic settings of shared reality as well as help develop and change thinking. And finally, word of mouth echoes all of these, as well as the personal view each individual forms of the world. All this changes and reforms human systems constantly. In this sense, the global community is already acting together as a complex, dynamic communicating system. This logic of dynamic, systemic communication and exchange could be seen as a starting point for developing more sustainable lifestyles and a global eco-community for the whole planet.

Spontaneously or by force

People change by their own choice or because of an external force – and in many ways between these two extremes. Some people and organizations seem to adopt a sustainable lifestyle very

quickly by themselves, or they don't even need to do much, they just adapt naturally and spontaneously – they are born innovators and visionaries in this respect. People and organizations at the other extreme will not change their current lifestyle unless they are forced to by authorities and laws, or by other external forces. (Chart 2)

HOW TO MAKE PEOPLE CHANGE
TO MORE SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE

DIY– FOLLOW THEM   HELP THEM WANT TO CHANGE   FORCE THEM

BOTTOM-UP WAY   TOP DOWN WAY
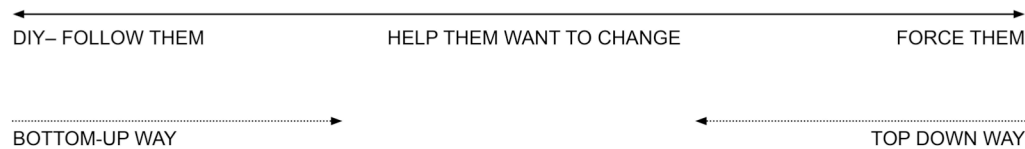
Chart 2. Extremes in changing behaviors.

In panarchies, or in systems seen from any perspective, both of these dimensions can be found. There are cases where a system changes spontaneously from within, either because a need for change is anticipated or an opportunity seized. Spontaneity can be seen as internal pressure for change. In some other cases, a change in the environment, for example a collapse of a supporting system or a rapid change of rules, forces a system to change. Most changes probably happen for reasons that are between the two extremes; some pressure from the inside, some from the outside. Between these two, the middle ground might be called "helping them want to change" – there are many different ways of mixing spontaneity and force.

As the idea of "helping people want to change" is not new in the history of mankind, it is not surprising that there is a whole industry out there trying to do this. Marketing and advertising can make people change their behavior - the current situation of mankind is impressive proof of this.

When adoption of something new happens due to marketing, it is usually because this new thing is supposed to improve us, or our lives, in some way. It could, for example, help us adopt a behavior that is supposed to make us appear more powerful, or it could be a product that helps ease our dull routines. This is especially true of new technologies that hold the promise of giving us a competitive advantage. Often this is something that is advertised as happening quickly: if we adopt or acquire something it will start to benefit us almost immediately.

When adopting new, more sustainable lifestyles, there is a core promise of making our lives better in a more gradual, incremental way. By adjusting the way we conduct our lives, we will cause less harm to the planet. If not us, then our descendants will benefit, together with nature itself. To become mainstream, this idea would have to endure and win out over other ideas that promise faster improvements – or else we will have to find ways to communicate how eco-consciousness and sustainable lifestyles also give us more immediate rewards.

A marketing approach – from the bell curve to crossing the chasm

In marketing new technologies, it is well known that some people always adopt new ideas earlier than others. Rogers (1995) identified a bell curve shaped continuum of adoption where different groups of people adopt new technologies in consecutive phases. (Chart 3)
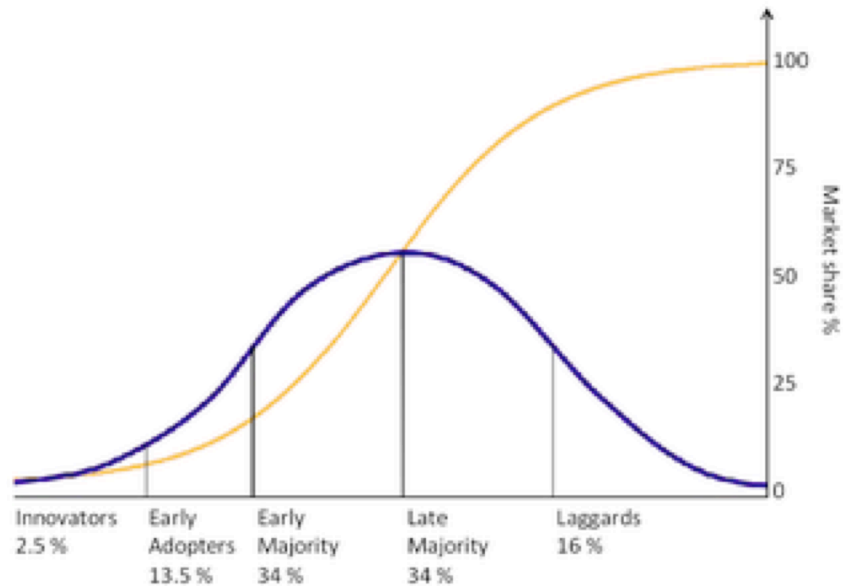
Chart 3. Rogers, 1995: Diffusion of innovations.

Moore (1999) identified another feature in this bell curve, which he saw as a weakness in the original idea. Moore pointed that adoption of new technologies does not happen smoothly and in uninterrupted fashion, as there is a difference between the adopting style of every identified group of people on the bell curve. Especially significant is the gap between the early adopters and the majority, or the early market and the mainstream market. This gap Moore calls "the chasm". He claims that many products fall into this chasm because the marketers fail to understand how to bring about the cross from the early market to the mainstream market. (Chart 4)
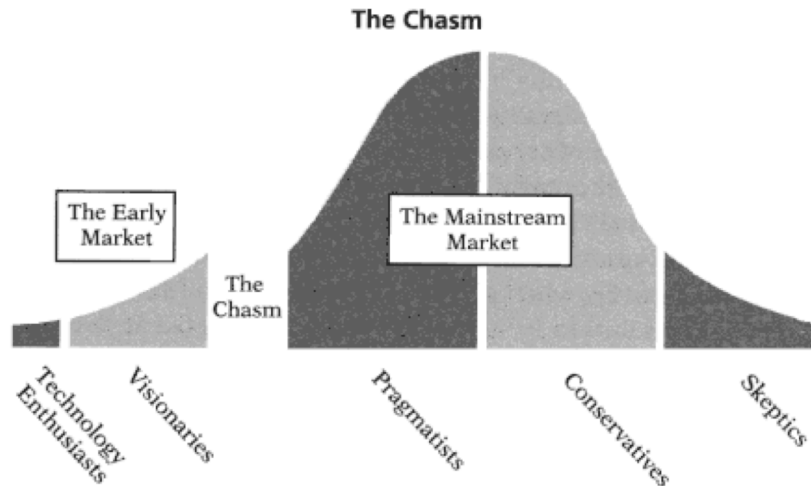
The Chasm

Chart 4. Moore, 1999: Crossing the chasm.

On each side of the chasm, people are adopting new technologies in different ways. In the early market, the adopters are innovators and visionaries who act from inherent reasons, while in the mainstream market, the adopters are pragmatists who avoid taking risks. The innovators and visionaries are open to new ideas and products, but the pragmatists are cautious. Moore suggests that to enter the mainstream market, it is most important to be prepared to build a relationship through communication. For the pragmatists, a new product has to solve an existing problem. They do not want to be like the early market people, who test new emerging products at their own risk. Peer communication is also important; the opinions of peers contribute to the strengthening or rejecting of new ideas.

Pragmatists also want to buy from someone that they trust, and building this trust takes a great deal of effort. Part of this is having the product available, along with a whole system of matching parts, appliances and services – what Moore calls the "whole product". According to Moore, pragmatists always evaluate and buy whole products (Moore, 1999, 112); they even prefer lower quality in core products over better ones, if the whole product is more complete. So, they prefer their existing lifestyle, with less quality (e.g. more damaging to nature), because it receives more support and it is easy.

Visionaries and pragmatists in sustainability

Moore's findings in the differences between psychographic groups also seem to be relevant to the context of sustainable lifestyles. Here too there are innovators and visionary leaders who manage to convince a group of people to adopt a more sustainable vision and lifestyle. But the way to make sustainable lifestyle genuinely mainstream, creating a global eco-community, is yet to be seen. An explanation for this might be that the majority of people remain pragmatists, and they want to be sure that they are not doing the wrong thing when adopting an idea – they prefer to wait and see. "If the goal of visionaries is to take a quantum leap forward, the goal of

pragmatists is to make a percentage improvement – incremental, measurable, predictable progress" (Moore, 1999, 42).

Mainstream pragmatists are looking to their peers' behavior for guidance and reassurance that the choice they are about to make is a good one. They are also heavily influenced by existing marketing messages. And, as the pragmatists are the biggest market for products, companies are reluctant to let go once they have their hands on them – thus, the mainstream pragmatists are overwhelmed with marketing messages every day. This way, the current lifestyle of this large group of people is reinforced continuously. And if they have found their lifestyle acceptable, it can be hard to convince them to start acting as agents for change, as the kind of people that the emergence of a global eco-community requires.

The sustainable lifestyle becoming mainstream – communication as a lever

If the idea of sustainable lifestyle or global eco-community is intended to enter mainstream reality, we need to take into account how other mainstream ideas gain momentum. People are already living in a paradigm of consumerism so the method of market impact and marketing communication simply has to be taken into account. To avoid creating chasms that impede change, we need to understand the systemic and panarchic nature of communication in human lifestyles. People are always influenced by a complex web of messages coming from mass communication and marketing, education, and from their friends and families.

We need to look at the sustainable lifestyle or a global eco-community as something that could benefit people in their everyday lives, just as technologies do. To see sustainable lifestyle that way, we would need to communicate about it differently. A sustainable lifestyle solution is in fact usually problem solving: it might help us for example to use less water or less energy and to save money. The problem just needs to be communicated as being real, and the solution as a solid one, as the pragmatists in the mainstream will not be attracted by the sheer "alternativeness" of a lifestyle solution. To understand the behavior of this critical mass, it is important to remember that they are looking for solutions that are safe and easy, and that really benefit them. This is a crucial challenge: to communicate sustainable lifestyle as something that solves problems for people, instead of creating new problems that make daily life more complicated.

At all levels of panarchies, human lifestyles can change so that the change is initiated both by internal pressure (from the faster, innovative level of a panarchy) or from the outside (changes in the supporting system). The challenge is to understand how in all interactions, our communication, or lack of it, influences the system. A change in any subsystem, or at the faster level of a panarchy, always changes the state of the whole system to some extent, and it can even help bring pioneering action into the mainstream. In the drive for sustainable lifestyles or a global eco-community, one of the most powerful levers can be communication.

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