

Eco-terrorism or Eco-tage

An Argument for the Proper Frame

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Between 1996 and 2001, a group of radical environmentalists called “the Family” committed several acts of arson, sabotage, and other destruction in the name of the Earth Liberation Front. As the *New York Times* reported, these activists burned or vandalized “an electrical transmission tower; timber research centers; a Eugene police station; a ski resort in Vail, Colo.; and other sites in five Western states that they had viewed as threats to the environment or their mission” (Yardley 1).

Three members of “the Family” were arrested in 2005, and in May 2007, Chelsea D. Gerlach, Stanislas G. Meyeroff, and Kevin Tubbs were all sentenced not merely as arsonists or vandals but as terrorists. In each case, Judge Ann L. Aiken used the “terrorism enhancement” classification to significantly extend the sentence. The three activists received 34 years and seven months of prison time between them for “eco-terrorism.”

On the morning of April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh parked a rental truck filled with racing fuel and fertilizer in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Okla. Just as the building opened for the day’s business, McVeigh lit two timed fuses and abandoned the truck. At 9:02 a.m. the truck exploded as he’d planned, killing 168 people, including 19 children. McVeigh was labeled a domestic terrorist.

On September 11, 2001, nineteen hijackers boarded four commercial airplanes. Two of those planes crashed into the World Trade Center’s North and South Towers in New York City. The third careened into the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed in a Pennsylvania field. The hijackers killed 2,976 people and shook the nation in perhaps the most devastating act of terrorism in American history.

What these three examples have in common is a term: terrorism. Yet these examples also raise a question: What does the term “terrorism” mean? Is it accurate to lump illegal acts that destroy property but carefully avoid harming people into the same category as acts clearly intended to kill? Is this a difference of kind or just of degree? While we (the authors) don’t generally endorse the destruction of property as a method of generating social change, we believe that the destruction of property is fundamentally different from the intentional killing of people; therefore, to call acts of obstruction, trespassing, vandalism, sabotage, or arson “terrorism” is inaccurate and has the potential to damage one’s understanding of real acts of terrorism, thereby reducing the potency of the term.

We started this project with a hunch. In recent years, we have observed frequent use of the term “eco-terrorism,” in the news media and in conversations, in reference to the acts of environmentalists. Our observations were anecdotal, and we wanted to be sure they were accurate. We found no literature analyzing cultural acceptance of the term “eco-terrorism”; therefore, before embarking on an ethical analysis of this phenomenon, we set out to confirm our casual observation that the term was widely used in the United States.

We conducted an analysis of the use of the term in U.S. newspapers across a period of nearly 11 years. Our analysis indicates broad acceptance of the term among both

journalists and their sources, making it all the more important to understand both the history and the implications of labeling obstruction, trespassing, vandalism, sabotage, and arson as “ecoterrorism.”

Terrorism, a Brief Etymology

The *Oxford English Dictionary* places the first common use of the term “terrorism” in 1795. Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg elaborates on the OED’s claim in his essay “It All Started with Robespierre.” He traces the word’s origins to the French Revolution in what is known as the Reign of Terror. Nunberg writes, “The Jacobin Leader, Robespierre, called Terror . . . ‘nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible.’ And in the months that followed, the severe and inflexible justice of the guillotine severed 12,000 counterrevolutionary heads before it got around to abbreviating Robespierre himself” (50). Nunberg notes that through the 19th and into the 20th centuries, the term shifted in context and association, losing its capital letter and becoming more pejorative, but there was one constant: It remained connected to violence directed against other human beings.

By the 1990s, however, the term was being used much more broadly: “People were crying terrorism whenever they discerned an attempt at intimidation or disruption,” Nunberg writes. “Hackers who concocted computer viruses were cyberterrorists, cult leaders were psychological terrorists. ... And when photographer Spencer Tunick got thirty people to lie down naked for a picture in front of the United Nations building in New York, a critic described the piece as ‘artistic terrorism at its best’” (53).

A key player in this change was libertarian activist Ron Arnold. He coined the term “ecoterrorism” in a 1983 article published in *Reason*, the monthly publication of the libertarian Reason Foundation. Arnold is Executive Vice President of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise (CDFE), and, as his website biography states, he is “honored as the ‘Father of the Wise Use Movement’” and an “effective fighter for individual liberties, property rights and limited government” (“Staff and Advisors”). He is also the author of the 1997 book *Eco-terror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature*, published by the Free Enterprise Press, an arm of the CDFE. Arnold is openly hostile to anything he sees as violating his libertarian views on individual property rights and the use of public lands by extractive industries. He claims the “wise use” movement has “created a sector of public opinion that didn’t used to exist” and that “[n]o one was aware that environmentalism was a problem until we came along” (Egan). His stated goal is “to destroy environmentalists by taking their money and their members” (Egan).

Another turning point in the history of the term came during congressional testimony for the 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act (*Cong. Rec.* 30811). This testimony marks the first time the idea of “eco-terrorism” entered statute. In her article on the vilification of radical environmentalists, Rebecca K. Smith provides a concise summary of these

hearings. During a discussion regarding the use of booby traps by those attempting to protect marijuana crops being grown on public land, Senator James McClure turned the conversation to what he called “eco-terrorists,” who he claimed were “just as dangerous and deadly as the drug producers.” With virtually no corroborating evidence, McClure claimed “terrorist thugs” were “driving citizens off the public lands” (30811). Because of McClure’s claims, Congress enacted punishment for the use of “hazardous or injurious devices” on public land (18 USC. Sec. 1864(a)(2)). A piece of legislation that was originally focused on illegal drug production on public land was expanded to make certain forms of environmental protest much more difficult. As Smith notes, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has also held (in a 2005 decision) that even a rope tied between trees during a tree-sit protest qualifies as a hazardous or injurious device (Smith 547).

During the next decade, acceptance of the term “eco-terrorism” seems to have steadily grown, and in June of 1998, the House of Representatives’ Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Crime held a hearing specifically addressing “Eco-terrorism by Radical Environmental Organizations.” The witnesses included Ron Arnold and Representative Frank Riggs of California. Riggs gave wide-ranging testimony, including a claim that a logger had been killed as a result of an Earth First! tree-spiking incident. He asserted that the “systematic, organized ecoterrorism of Earth First! and other militant organizations must stop. Lives have been lost”

(Riggs). Smith provides detailed refutation of Riggs’ claims and adds, “While no mill worker has ever been killed by radical environmentalists, unfortunately a radical environmentalist was killed by a logger only months after the 1998 Senate hearing” (Smith 551).

However, since 2001, the federal government’s own definition of terrorism has not been consistent. In response to the attacks of 9/11, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act and the Homeland Security Act. The USA PATRIOT Act defined domestic terrorism as “acts dangerous to human life.” (USA PATRIOT Act). Similarly, the Homeland Security Act defined terrorism as actions “dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources” (Homeland).¹

In 2002, the FBI defined terrorism even more broadly. On February 12, James F. Jarboe, Domestic Terrorism Section Chief of the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI, testified before the House Resources Committee’s Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health. In his testimony, Jarboe defined domestic terrorism as “the unlawful use, or threatened use, of violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States (or its territories) without foreign direction, committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives,” and eco-terrorism as “the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or

¹ To date, we have no evidence that any act labeled as “eco-terrorism” has destroyed critical infrastructure or key resources.

property by an environmentally oriented, subnational group for environmental- political reasons, or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature” (United States of America).

In other words, while the USA PATRIOT Act specifies human life as the issue, the FBI’s definition not only *includes* property but elevates it to the same level as human life. Furthermore, as evidenced by the enhanced sentences handed down to “the Family” by Judge Aiken in 2007

(referred to at the beginning of this article), U.S. federal courts have considered damage to property to be terrorism.

Assessing the Degree of Acceptance

Although it is clear from the above that “eco-terrorism” has been adopted as a legal term, we wanted to know if it had entered common usage outside of government and legal circles. To answer this question, we could have analyzed informal conversations, formal speeches, or news reports from either broadcast or print media. We chose to analyze newspaper articles because language use in newspapers is documented, retrievable, and searchable. Articles from a wide variety of U.S. newspapers are available through the LexisNexis Academic database. In addition, the language in news stories is carefully selected by professional reporters and editors; it is representative of language used—or at least understood—by readers (i.e., the general public); and has the potential to influence the language use of readers.

Thus, to assess the degree of acceptance of the term “eco-terrorism” in the United States, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of U.S. newspaper articles over a period of nearly 11 years.

Research Questions

Our research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent have the news media used the term “eco-terrorism” and its derivations, such as “eco-terrorist” or “eco-terror,” over the years 1999 through 2009?
2. Who uses the term: journalists, their sources, or both?
3. When the term is used, what is the nature of its use? Does the person using the term seem to accept “eco-terrorism” as the appropriate word to use, or does the person distance him- or herself from the word, indicating a lack of acceptance?

Methodology

Content analysis is the scientific inquiry into theoretically meaningful questions and problems that cannot be answered by a cursory or haphazard examination of documentary materials. Quantitative content analysis allows the researcher to sample from a large body of documentary material with the confidence that the sample and the results will be representative of that large body of material (Holsti). In other words, this method allowed us to make inferences about the relevant content offered by *all* newspapers in the U.S. over the years of interest without examining every article published in every newspaper. According to Ole Holsti, author of the seminal book on content analysis, “A further advantage of quantification is that statistical methods provide a powerful set of tools not only for precise and parsimonious summary of findings, but also for improving the quality of interpretation and inference” (9).

Source and Sampling Design for the Content Analysis

The content to be analyzed was derived from the “US Newspapers and Wires” source category of LexisNexis Academic. The time frame of this study was Jan. 1, 1999, through Sept. 25, 2009. We selected this time period to capture data from before and after the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001, because we wondered if there was a change in use of the term “terrorism” to refer to environmentally motivated actions after 9/11.

We used the following string of search terms to locate appropriate articles: “ecoterrorism or eco terrorism or eco-terrorism or environmental terrorism.” We collected 1,818 articles containing one of more of these terms. The second stage of the sampling design involved selecting individual articles to be included in the study. We included every third article for a total of 606 articles. After removing duplicate articles, the sample size totaled 594.

In addition to searching for articles containing the term “eco-terrorism” and its variants, we searched for words that we believe to be more accurate, including various spellings of “ecosabotage,” “eco-arson,” and “eco-tage.”¹ The reason for these searches was to see if these terms were used as frequently as the variants of “eco-terrorism.”

¹ “Eco-tage” is the preferred term among radical environmentalists when referring to acts that damage property in order to halt environmental destruction.

These searches turned up far fewer articles, many of which also contained references to eco-terrorism. As indicated in Table 1, a search for articles containing “eco-sabotage or ecosabotage or environmental sabotage” identified 182 articles (of which only 68 did not *also* include the terms “terror,” “terrorism,” and/or “terrorist” in reference to acts of radical environmentalism); a search for articles containing “eco-arson or ecoarson or environmental arson” identified 28 articles (of which only 12 did not also contain “terror,” “terrorism,” and/or “terrorist”); and a search for articles containing “eco-tage or ecotage” identified 18 articles (of which eight did not also use “terror,” “terrorism,” and/or “terrorist”). In other words, of the 228 articles using the movement’s preferred terms, only 88 discussed acts of radical environmentalism without using some variation of the word “terrorism.” These numbers clearly indicate that “terrorism” was used far more frequently (1,818 articles) than variations of “eco-sabotage,” “eco-arson,” and “eco-tage” (88 articles).

The content analysis for this study was conducted only on articles containing the word “eco-terrorism” or one of its variants.

We used “article” as the unit of analysis in the study, “term” as the recording unit and “sentence” as the context unit to be searched for the meaning of each term. We defined “article” as a discrete section of text with its own heading (including letters to the editor) and “term” as a single appearance of any of the variations of “eco-terrorism” (see list of variations under *Use of Term* in next section).

Coding Scheme (Operational Definitions)

Before analyzing the recording units, two trained coders² determined whether each article was a news story, an opinion piece/editorial or a letter to the editor. We made this distinction because we expect more objectivity from news stories than from opinion pieces or letters to the 4 editor.

The use of the word “terrorism” in relation to environmentalist activism was measured by three indicators: “use of term,” “who uses term,” and “nature of use.”

“*Use of term*” was defined as a single appearance of one of the following words or phrases: ecoterrorism, eco-terrorism, eco terrorism, environmental terrorism, ecoterrorist, ecoterrorist, or terrorism or terrorist when used in reference to environmental activism.

“*Who uses term*” was defined as the person who uses the term, either the author of the article or a source quoted in the article.

“*Nature of use*” was defined as the way the term was used by the author: either as the appropriate term to use, as a term that the author does not fully accept, or in a novel way. Coders chose from the following three categories:

² The authors wish to thank Chelsea Langevin and Sterling Scott for their assistance with this study.

Accepting: The author does not indicate any unease with the term and seems to accept the term as the appropriate description of the activity, as indicated by use of the term without quotes around it and without any qualifiers, such as “alleged” or “so-called,” in front of the term.

Distancing: The author does not fully accept the term as appropriate and attempts to distance him- or herself from the term, as indicated by the use of quotation marks around the term, by the insertion of “alleged” or “so-called” in front of the term, or by only using the term in quotations of other people’s words.

Novel: The author is using the term in a new way, unrelated to acts of environmental activism, such as calling something “philosophical eco-terrorism” or referring to a wild bear’s activities as “eco-terrorism.”

Findings of Content Analysis

After a series of training sessions and a test of intercoder reliability to ensure consistent application of the coding instrument, two paid research assistants performed formal coding duties.¹ The sample of 594 articles broke down as follows: 82.3% were news stories, 15% were opinion/editorial pieces, and 2.7% were letters to the editor. We identified 1,345 uses of the term “eco-terrorism” or one of its variants (see Table 2).

Research question 1 asked: To what extent have the news media used the term “ecoterrorism” and its derivations over the years 1999 through 2009? As reported above, we found that the news media have used variations on “eco-terrorism” far more than they have used such terms as “eco-sabotage,” “eco-arson,” and “ecotage.” Our search for articles containing the word “eco-terrorism” or one of its variations turned up 1,818 articles in the U.S. newspapers and wire services database published between Jan. 1, 1999, and Sept. 25, 2009. In contrast, we found only 182 articles containing the word “eco-sabotage” or one of its variations, only 28 articles containing “eco-arson” or one of its variations, and only 18 articles containing “eco-tage or ecotage” (see Table 1).

Research question 2 asked: Who uses the term: journalists, their sources, or both? Of the 1,345 uses of “eco-terrorism” identified, 1,137 were used by the author (either a reporter, a letter writer or an editorial writer), and 208 were attributed to a source in the article (see Table 2). The majority of uses were by authors (as opposed to sources), indicating general acceptance of the term by journalists, given that journalists were the authors of most of the articles analyzed.

Research question 3 asked, “When these terms are used, what is the nature of the use? Does the person using the term seem to accept ‘eco-terrorism’ as the appropriate word to use, or does the person distance him- or herself from the word, indicating a lack of acceptance?” We found that 1,147 uses of the term (or 85.3%) were accepting, 190 (14.1%) were distancing, and 8 (0.6%) were a novel use that didn’t relate to our investigation (see Table 2).

We used crosstabulation to determine whether there was a relationship between who used the term (authors or sources) and the nature of the use (accepting or distancing). First, however, we removed the eight instances of a novel use of the term (such as a wild bear who was described as committing “eco-terrorism” on a neighborhood) from the database. We found very little difference between authors and sources: 85.5% of the

¹ Detailed information regarding the coding instrument and the test of intercoder reliability can be obtained by contacting the authors.

uses of “eco-terrorism” or its variants by authors indicated acceptance of the term, and 87.3% of uses by sources indicated acceptance of the term (see Table 3). A chi-square test of independence indicated that the correlation between who used the term and the nature of the use was not statistically significant, meaning that how people used the term “eco-terrorism,” whether accepting it as the appropriate term or distancing themselves from it, could not be attributed to the role of the person using the term (author versus source).

This result was somewhat surprising because we expected authors, the majority of whom were journalists, to be less accepting of the term than sources (see Table 2). This expectation was based on two premises: First, most of the articles were news stories written by journalists, and objectivity is an important professional value of American journalists². Therefore, we would expect journalists to avoid using a term coined by someone who is vociferously opposed to the activities being written about, except in direct quotations of sources. Secondly, sources in news stories about destructive environmental activities are likely to include government authorities, such as police officers, prosecuting attorneys, and FBI agents, who would perhaps be more prone to call the activities “eco-terrorism” because various branches of government, including the FBI, have adopted this label.

To determine whether there was a relationship between the type of article (news, opinion or letter to the editor) and the nature of the use of the term (accepting or distancing), we used crosstabulation again, anticipating that letter writers and guest editorial writers might show more acceptance of the term than journalists—again, because of journalists’ presumed commitment to objectivity. However, we found widespread acceptance across all article types: 86.3% of uses in news stories, 84.2% of uses in opinion pieces, and 81.8% of uses within letters to the editor indicated acceptance of the term (see Table 4). A chi-square test of independence indicated that the correlation between type of article and nature of use was not statistically significant, meaning that how people used the term, whether accepting it as the appropriate term or rhetorically distancing themselves from the term, could not be attributed to the type of article the term appeared in—nor, by logical extension, to the type of person who wrote the article, whether a journalist, opinion writer or letter writer.

Regarding the question of whether there was an increase in usage of the term “terrorism” associated with pro-environment activism in the months following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, we found that, indeed, there had been. We compared articles in our dataset from a time period of 32 months before 9/11 (January 1999 through August 2001) to those from a period of 32 months after 9/11 (October 2001 through

² *News Reporting and Writing*, a textbook written by faculty at the prestigious University of Missouri School of Journalism and used to train journalists across the country, states, “The rules that mainstream journalists follow in attempting to arrive at the best obtainable version of the truth—to report accurately, fairly and without bias—are commonly summarized in the concept of objectivity. Objectivity has been and still is accepted as a working credo by most American journalists, as well as by students and teachers of journalism” (Brooks, et al. 15).

May 2004) and found that variations of “ecoterrorism” appeared 294 times in articles from the pre-9/11 period and 451 times in the post-9/11 period.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the content analysis indicate that our concern about the widespread acceptance and use of the term “eco-terrorism” in relation to acts of environmental activism was well founded. It appears that during our study period (1999 through most of 2009), the term “eco-terrorism” was readily accepted by most who wrote or were quoted on the topic of environmental activism in U.S. newspapers.

Our first indication that “eco-terrorism” had become the preferred term in the news media was the great disparity we found between the number of articles containing variations on the word “eco-terrorism” (1,818) and the number of articles using the environmental movement’s preferred terms, such as “eco-sabotage,” “eco-arson,” and “ecotage,” with no mention of “terrorism” (88).

That 82 percent of the articles containing the term “eco-terrorism” were news stories (as opposed to opinion pieces or letters to the editor) is an indicator of widespread acceptance of the term by professional journalists.

Our findings regarding the nature of the use of “eco-terrorism” in the 594 articles we analyzed provide the strongest indication that the term has become widely accepted as the appropriate word to describe destructive acts of environmental activism. More than 85% of uses of the term by authors (primarily journalists), as well as sources, were accepting of the term rather than distancing. That is, the authors and sources did nothing rhetorically to indicate that they did not fully accept the term. And whether the term appeared in a letter to the editor, an opinion piece, or a news story, it was used in a way that indicated acceptance of the term at least 80% of the time.

With this understanding of what has been published in the leading U.S. newspapers over the last decade—and our suspicions of widespread acceptance and use of the term “terrorism” in relation to acts of environmental activism validated—we turn to our arguments as to why calling such acts “eco-terrorism,” a term coined by a political opponent of environmentalists as a tool to discredit them, is both inaccurate and unethical.

What's in a Term?

So, what's in a term? Why does the term we use make so much difference? The answer is simple: The terms we use shape the way we perceive reality, and that perception shapes our actions. Therefore, the terms we use have real-world consequences. In the case of “eco-terrorism” versus “eco-sabotage,” the choice of terms can shape the public debate and have far-reaching policy implications, including more jail time for activists such as Gerlach, Meyeroff, and Tubbs.

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke addresses the power that terms have in shaping debate in *Language as Symbolic Action*. He argues that words simultaneously create and terminate meaning and that language creates screens—*terministic screens*—through which we see the world. He writes: “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (45). In other words, language is always partial; it reveals while it also conceals. Even the most precise terms leave out much more than they include. But more importantly, as we select the terms for our debates, we not only select and deflect reality, we also—through our selection—predetermine the possible directions of the debate at hand. Burke writes:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations in the sense that the terms direct the *attention* to one field rather than another. Also, *many of the ‘observations’ are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made*. In brief, much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.

(Burke’s italics) (46).

Burke makes two important points here. First, when we observe the world, we are never truly objective; our observations are already colored by the terms we use. Our terms *screen* the world, making possible some meanings and terminating others. Second, we are often unaware of the *terministic* effect our terms create; therefore, what we assume to be clear observations of reality are really the “spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (46). We use language, but at the same time, language uses us.

When coining the term “eco-terrorism” in 1983, Ron Arnold clearly wanted to shape the debate. In his article titled “Eco-Terrorism,” he argues for the replacement of the term “ecosabotage” and the elevation of property to the same level as human life. By

doing so, he “*directs the attention*” of his reader to a particular field of possibilities, thus fundamentally changing the debate and tipping the balance in favor of large resource-extraction industries and developers. He’s not sinister; he’s smart. He understands the principle Burke explicates above. Ultimately, Arnold succeeded in gaining acceptance for the term he coined among U.S. legislators, federal judges, journalists and, presumably, the general public.

When the idea of terministic screens enters public discourse, it is often called *framing* (Lakoff, McCombs and Bell), and the effect of framing by the mass media is *agenda setting*. During the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw conducted the first study of agenda setting by the mass media. They surveyed undecided voters in Chapel

Hill, North Carolina, regarding their perception of the key issues of the day. Using the survey responses, the researchers then ranked the issues. Next, they analyzed a selection of local and national newspapers, news magazines, and television newscasts from the weeks preceding the survey, also noting and ranking the prevalence of various issues covered. Of their research, McCombs later wrote: “[The] central hypothesis was that the mass media set the agenda of issues for a political campaign by influencing the salience of issues among voters. Those issues emphasized in the news come to be regarded over time as important by members of the public” (McCombs *Setting* 2). McCombs’ and Shaw’s study showed a high degree of correlation between the rankings in the survey and the rankings in the content analysis (McCombs and Shaw). In other words, the issues seen as important by the editors, reporters, and commentators were also the issues seen as important by the voters who were surveyed. To use Burke’s words, the news media were able to direct “the *attention* to one field rather than another” (46). Since the initial agenda-setting study by McCombs and Shaw in 1968, more than 400 studies of the agenda-setting phenomenon have supported their original findings (McCombs *Setting*).

It follows, then, that when the majority of news articles on the subject of environmental activism employ the term “eco-terrorism,” it influences how the public thinks about such acts—equating them with far more heinous crimes intended to injure and kill hundreds or thousands of people.

This concerns us because the culture of journalism counts objectivity among its professional values, and most audience members expect objectivity from newspapers. Using the term “eco-terrorism,” rather than a more precise and accurate term to refer to acts that do not harm or threaten human life, is not particularly objective. It reflects a bias against acts of sabotage that are committed for one political reason as opposed to another. This bias is demonstrated by the media’s inconsistent use of the term “terrorism.” A case in point is the 2011 tragedy in Tucson, Arizona. A gunman killed six people and wounded 13 others. A federal judge and a nine-year-old girl were among the dead, and a congresswoman was shot in the head. However, in the American news media, the shooter was initially labeled an assassin, but not a terrorist, even though the event resembled events that have been labeled terrorism by authorities and the news

media. Although we recognize that it is impossible to use language without framing the discussion to some extent, we expect the news media to be self-critical and careful in choosing terms, knowing that the words they choose shape their audiences' perception of reality. We find such a critical awareness lacking in the seemly wide acceptance of the term "ecoterrorism."

Arson, Vandalism, Eco-tage; not Terrorism

According to the FBI's definition of terrorism (cited earlier), the three examples at the beginning of this paper are all terrorism. However, we have difficulty equating the destruction of property with the destruction of human beings. There is a fundamental difference between destroying SUVs and flying an airplane full of people into a building full of people. Parking a truck bomb in front of a federal building with the intention of killing both government employees and their children is not a difference in degree but a difference in kind. To not draw a distinction between property and people is to lose a distinction that has been foundational to our democracy.

In *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization*, Christopher Manes argues for the importance of this distinction. He notes that despite pressure from industrialists to “include property as among the most precious natural rights” (181), such an inclusion has “never been accepted by American jurisprudence” (181). He writes:

[Property] was intentionally left out of the Declaration of Independence's list of inalienable rights—“Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—since Jefferson had a genuine distrust of the mercantile tenor behind property law. It failed to appear in the Preamble to the Constitution, alongside justice, tranquility, general welfare, and liberty, as one of the purposes of the document. It emerges as a right for the first time in the Fourteenth Amendment's due-process clause. Even here, however, American jurisprudence never recognized property as an inalienable right, but rather as a “bundle of rights” (to use the Supreme Court's words) and responsibilities. (181)

The United States government regulates individual property rights to a much greater degree than it regulates individuals. Whether it's a zoning law that doesn't allow one to put an adult bookstore in a residential neighborhood or the regulation of tree harvesting on private timberland, the state clearly sees property rights much differently than individual rights. To blur the line between people and property—as the FBI now does in its definition of eco-terrorism—is to go against long-standing tradition. It also tips the political balance even further in favor of corporations and large property holders—something industry has sought throughout American history.

Ron Arnold would like to expand the definition even further. In *Eco-terror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature*, he argues that peaceful protest involving obstruction or interference should also be considered eco-terrorism. Arnold writes, “Obstruction is not a peaceful act. Obstruction is an act of physical coercion, an act of violence against another, regardless [sic] how passively performed” (121). Under such a definition, sit-ins, peace marches that slow traffic, and other means of peaceful protest would be considered terrorism. If we accept this definition, where do we draw the line? What type of dissent would *not* be considered terrorism?

The danger of this slippery slope becomes apparent when put in the context of the American Civil Rights Movement. If Arnold and other anti-environmental activists had their way, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have spent a much longer time in the Birmingham jail; he would have not just been convicted of violating Bull Conner’s injunction against protest, he would have received an increased sentence under the terrorism-enhancement law. For Arnold, Dr. King’s acts of obstruction and interference would have qualified as terrorism. The closer one looks at the expanding definition of terrorism that Arnold proposes, the more of a problem it becomes.

Another important distinction between environmental activists and genuine terrorists is core philosophy. Whether it’s Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden, sacred regard for life is clearly absent in genuine terrorists. For environmental activists, however, the sacredness of life is the motivating idea for their actions.

Environmental activism has gleaned much from writers and thinkers such as Edward Abbey, Gary Snyder, Paul Shepard, Carolyn Merchant, Arne Naess, and others. Two unifying themes of these writers are a belief in the sacredness of the Earth and making a distinction between humans and property. Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a good example. Edward Abbey played an important role at some of the early Earth First! rallies. In *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, while recalling the origins of Earth First!, Dave Foreman writes that one of the goals of the group was “to inspire others to carry out activities straight from the pages of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*” (18). In Abbey’s novel, a small and colorful band of Westerners tries to slow the development of the Four Corners area through eco-tage—destroying road-building equipment, pulling up survey stakes, blowing up bridges. Yet, the tension between the destruction of property and the risk to people runs throughout, and Abbey uses the novel to ask if human casualties are justified in reaching an eco-centric worldview. Abbey’s answer is “no,” and in the novel, he draws a clear distinction between people and property.¹

A second example of the importance of preserving life comes from the deep ecology movement, a core inspiration for radical environmentalism. In the preface to *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, a book attempting to articulate the movement’s thinking, Bill Devall and George Sessions state their purpose as being to promote “the

¹ This tension—and evidence that human casualties are beyond the point Abbey’s characters are willing to venture—appears in both Chapter 14, “Working on the Railroad,” and Chapter 28, “Into the Heat: The Chase Continues.”

dance of unity of humans, plants, animals, the Earth” (ix). In several articles, Bron Taylor argues that because of this underlying assumption about the sacredness of life, any actions from radical environmental groups with intent to maim or kill are highly unlikely (“Religion,” “Tributaries,” “Threat”).

In fact, there is no documented evidence of harm coming to humans as a result of actions by radical environmentalists. In 1998, Taylor wrote, “Despite the recurrent debates about violence within radical environmental subcultures and the refusal by many activists to rule it out, there is little evidence of violence being deployed to cause injuries or death” (“Religion” 3). Taylor has been following the movement since 1998, and in a recent e-mail exchange, he assured us that, even with the rise in domestic terrorism and terrorist threats from abroad, there is still no evidence of the environmental movement committing acts that cause injury or death (Taylor “Ecoterrorism”).

Mike Roselle is one of the founders of Earth First!. When asked about the term “ecoterrorism” by Christopher Manes, Roselle responded with his usual wit: “To use the word ‘terrorism’ for monkeywrenching [e.g., disabling heavy equipment] is to totally cheapen the real meaning of what terrorism is all about, and what people do when they are really desperate” (Manes 177). Manes paraphrases Roselle: “Real terrorists would not be spiking trees . . . but spiking Merlot” (177).

Even Arnold seems to sense the difficulty in equating “eco-tage” with “terrorism.” In the 1983 article in which he coined the term “eco-terrorism,” he writes: “The very idea of ecoterrorism may seem to some a preposterous anti-environmentalist invention designed to discredit the programs of established groups such as the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. Scoffers have pointed out that industrial vandalism is nothing new in the United States” (“Eco-Terrorism” 32). Yet, he fails to answer this anticipated objection with even one example of an injury caused by an “eco-terrorist.” Arnold argues that the practice of radical environmental action is becoming more common and that mainstream environmental groups are looking the other way. He implies that there may be some threat of injury, but his article makes it clear that the major threat is to property. Arnold does perform a nice sleight of hand, however: he substitutes “eco-terrorism” for “eco-tage,” and sums up the threat as follows: “Eco-terrorism is a twofold weapon in achieving coercive command and control: it first burdens private enterprise with economic loss and psychological intimidation and secondly provides the midrange political pressure groups with a perspective by which to judge their own proposals as comparatively reasonable” (“EcoTerrorism” 35). He does not argue that environmental activism presents a substantial threat to life; he does not write of why the laws against obstruction, trespassing, vandalism, sabotage, and arson are not sufficient and appropriate; he simply—and successfully—makes the switch.

The difficulty of accepting Arnold’s term is illustrated by the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The breadth and depth of this disaster is still unknown, and it puts pressure on the definition of terrorism. A small group of activists can commit arson or vandalism, not hurt nor maim any human, and receive long sentences under terrorism-enhancement statutes; yet a multinational corporation can kill 11 workers,

destroy a vast ecosystem, and ruin the livelihoods of thousands, and—so far, anyway—no charges are filed against the responsible parties. Why is one terrorism and the other just business as usual?

We would argue that neither is terrorism. As Geoffrey Nunberg notes, the definition of terrorism has become so broad that it “could include anything from hijacking an airplane to injuring government property, breaking into a government computer for any reason, or hitting the secretary of agriculture with a pie” (54). The definition has become so broad that the word is, in a way, useless. Nunberg laments the broadening of the term, asserting “when things happen that merit the full force of our outrage, a legacy of careless usage can leave us at a loss for words” (54). If everything becomes terrorism, then nothing is. So, for the very fact that terrorism is real, we need to define it more narrowly.

Terrorism: A More Accurate Definition

To define terrorism more accurately, we must think about what distinguishes it from other crimes. What the law now calls acts of “eco-terror” already have very specific, useful labels—obstruction, trespassing, vandalism, sabotage, arson—and specific criminal penalties. We would argue that the acts of environmental activists have much more in common with the 15th century Dutch luddites, who rebelled against their own forced obsolescence through mechanization by sabotaging textile machines—literally placing their wooden shoe, or sabot, in the gears of automated looms—than with the 9/11 hijackers or the Oklahoma City bombers. Gerlach, Meyerhoff, and Tubbs committed illegal acts but did so in a way that did not pose significant risk to human life. The same cannot be said of Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden. Although all definitions have inherent problems, an accurate definition of terrorism must include a blatant disregard for life. Bron Taylor writes:

Blurring such distinctions by placing non-violent blockades, loud, “scary” and obnoxious protests, and injury-risking sabotage all under the “terrorism” label misleads the public about the social movements engaged in them. This can also exacerbate social conflicts by fanning fear and hatred, thereby encouraging and promoting a violent reaction by vigilantes and even by law enforcement authorities themselves. (“Religion” 25)

In short, by extending the definition of terrorism to include, as the FBI does, violence against property for a political purpose or to “intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (United States of America), we take three very real risks.

First, we risk stifling legitimate political dissent, whether it is protest to protect the environment or for another cause. Under this definition, lunch-counter sit-ins as implemented during the American Civil Rights Movement could be seen as attempts to intimidate or coerce government, and participants could be prosecuted as terrorists.¹ Second, such a broad definition diverts resources away from larger threats. In a post-9/11 world, no one is denying the real threat of terrorism, but the danger of a

¹ Some may argue that actions such as the Ku Klux Klan’s burning of crosses on someone’s lawn should not be seen as terrorism. But the difference is that the KKK has a long and documented history of committing murder as a way of following through on their more symbolic acts.

bomb in Times Square is quite different from even the worst property crimes being called “eco-terror.” Third, we already have adequate terms and penalties for property crimes—obstruction, trespassing, vandalism, sabotage, arson—and by classifying property crimes as terrorism, the term becomes less useful. Misused, extreme terms can blur reality. If all of our political opponents become Nazis, we forget the horrors of the Holocaust; if all crimes become terrorism, we forget the horrors of Oklahoma City and 9/11; we fail to see the difference between vandalizing heavy equipment and using commercial airplanes as cruise missiles.

Conclusion

As we began this project, we had a hunch that the term “eco-terrorism” had become widely, and uncritically, accepted. Our content analysis indicates that our initial hunch was correct. The majority of the newspaper articles we studied used the word “eco-terrorism” rather than, or in addition to, more moderate terms. Additionally, we found widespread acceptance of the term “eco-terrorism” as the appropriate word choice. It seems that most who use the term do so uncritically.

As we researched the history of the term “eco-terrorism,” we learned how it came into general use—coined in 1983 in a libertarian magazine, inserted into federal law in 1988 as a result of libertarian lobbying, becoming part of the FBI’s definition of terrorism by 2002, and readily accepted by the news media by 2009.

We have argued that the terms we choose matter. As Burke, Lakoff, McCombs, and others have noted, the language we use shapes the reality we inhabit. Therefore, we must be as accurate and precise as our language allows. We believe the terms “obstruction,” “trespassing,” “vandalism,” “sabotage,” and “arson” more accurately and precisely describe the actions currently labeled “eco-terrorism.”

We want to be clear: While we share a deep concern about human impact on the natural environment with many of those accused of “eco-terrorism,” we do not condone eco-tage. As firm believers in the democratic process, we hold that acts of civil disobedience, or direct action, should be used only as a last resort, when all other democratic remedies have been exhausted.

To clearly define terrorism, and therefore make it a useful term, we must draw the line at human life. If an act seeks to destroy human life, and, therefore, coerce or intimidate through the threat to human life, it is terrorism. However, if an act destroys property and is careful not to

injure or kill, it may be vandalism or arson, but it is not terrorism. To define it otherwise is inaccurate, unfair, and as Nunberg points out, takes the teeth out of the word “terrorism” for the times we really need it.

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Appendix

Table 1. Appearance of terms in U.S. newspapers and wire-service articles (Jan. 1, 1999, through Sept. 25, 2009)

Search terms	Number of articles containing search terms	Number of articles not containing “terrorism”
Eco-terrorism, eco terrorism or ecoterrorism or environmental terrorism	1,818	N/A
Eco-sabotage or ecosabotage or environmental sabotage	182	68
Eco-arson or ecoarson or environmental arson	28	12
Ecotage	18	8

Table 2. Percentages for variables

Variables	Number	Percent
Type of article		
News	489	82.32
Opinion piece	89	14.98
Letter to the editor	16	2.69
Who used term	(<i>N</i> =594)	100.00
Author	1,137	84.50
Source	208	15.50
Nature of use	(<i>N</i> =1,345)	100.00
Accepting	1,147	85.30
Distancing	190	14.10
Novel use	8	0.60
	(<i>N</i> =1,345)	100.00

Table 3. Crosstabulation of “nature of use” by “who used term.”

Nature of use	Who used term	
	Author	Source
Accepting 969 (85.5%)	178 (87.3%)	
Distancing 164 (14.5%)	26 (12.7%)	
	1,133 (100.0%)	204 (100.0%)

$$X^2 (1, N = 1,337) = .424, ns$$

Table 4. Crosstabulation of “nature of use” by “type of article.”

Nature of use	News	Opinion	Letter to editor	Type of article
Accepting 925 (86.3%)				
Distancing 147 (13.7%)				
35 (15.8%)	186 (84.2%)	36 (81.8%)		
8 (18.2%)				
1,072 (100.0%)	221 (100.0%)	44 (100.0%)		

$$\chi^2 (2, N = 1,337) = 1.267, \text{ } ns$$

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