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Go on, tell it like it really is

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The global economic downturn and rising worldwide poverty are key challenges to be met to secure a sustainable future, writes Monica Graaff

Our modernist mind-set is at the root of many of the world's current problems, yet we are all so hooked into it that we struggle to make the necessary shift. Not least among us are our editors, the keepers of public information and judgment.

Modernism and neo-liberalism, which have dominated our thinking since the Industrial Revolution, have been the making — and undoing — of recent human success on the planet.

Ironically, neither still lives entirely by its principles: self-critical awareness, aloof rationality and reductionism in the case of modernism, and free and unfettered market principles and maximising the "public good" in the case of neo-liberalism. Although modernists have been confident that they can explain and predict just about anything about the universe with the application of science and logic, they have been horribly wrong.

Today, doubt is stirring in most corners of the world — mainly caused by the frightening spectre of climate change, peak oil, the global economic recession and rising poverty. To be harsh, but practical, these are probably the best things that have happened to humanity in a long time. They are causing us to wake up and rethink our frames of reference.

Deep ecologists say that modernism has led to a fundamental male-principle ethic of dominance and conquest played out in various hierarchical, militaristic, capitalist and industrialist forms. It disallows the feminine-principle values of caring and respect so necessary to the nurturing of life and the creation of balance in society.

The social justice movement blames modernism for racial dominance, and eco-psychologists point out that it has had an impact on the psychological health and wellbeing of humankind. We are a society out of kilter with ourselves — physically, spiritually and mentally.

Where modernists have gone wrong is that they have failed to appreciate complexity — that we live in an intricately interconnected and interdependent world. We now know that our mind-set is fundamental to saving ourselves from unsustainability.

According to renowned author and systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo, we are at a critical juncture in history, a "decision-window" where we face both the danger of global collapse and the opportunity for worldwide renewal. We have six or seven years, he argues, to head off unsustainable trends that would lead to a tipping point beyond which there is no turning back.

After this tipping point, we either evolve to a safer, more sustainable world, or the social, economic and ecological systems that frame our life will break down.

This is the Chaos Point, the title of his most recent book, but this need not be the end of the world, only the end of a phase from which a new world could dawn. In today's "decision window" we have a unique chance of creating that new world.

But what are the media doing about all this?

Anton Harber, professor of journalism at Wits University, summed up the role of the traditional media at a Goedgedacht Forum discussion on press freedom in 2008: "The media will contribute to the kind of society we want, and the kind envisaged in our constitution, not by writing good-news stories but by the quality of debate and discussion, the level to which our media empowers our people to make informed decisions about their lives and their country. That can only come from a journalism that digs and probes and questions."

The scary thing is that while I believe wholeheartedly that this is precisely what our mainstream editors think they are doing, they are just not getting the big picture. While they are writing more and more about the environment — even on the business pages — they are just not doing their job as they ought to be.

What is important in a time of crisis — Laszlo's imminent "chaos" — is for the media to be

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more proactive, a lot more proactive than it might believe itself to be, and start telling the story of our time like it is.

There has never been a better story to tell, with all its doom and gloom and helplessness, villains and victims, and with all its opportunity for hope and glory and possibility of creating a better world. And it is not being told. Editors might well be afraid to go there, afraid of turning away readers with too much bad news. But they are forgetting: people love a good story; always have. And a really good story has all the ingredients I have just mentioned. We should not shy away from it.

- Graaff is an associate of Incite Sustainability and the 2008 SAB print environmental journalist of the year.

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