

Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 34, 20 August: Climate Scepticism – What Should Campaigners Do?

Climate Scepticism – What Should Campaigners Do?

One of the 'great debates' of our age – how to respond to climate change – is often framed by the media in terms of belief or disbelief. An article I have published at my website – '*Sustaining Disbelief: Media Pollism and Climate Change*' (http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/sustaining_disbelief.pdf) - analyses the different forms of 'scepticism' that are embedded in the 'climate change' debate and the way that the media sometimes 'samples' these to magnify, extend and exaggerate climate scepticism.

It shows for example that much quoted articles such as the '*Climate Change: Why we don't believe it*' in the UK political journal the *New Statesman*, mis-apply evidence of one form of scepticism (in this case about feasibility of taking action) to create a false picture of scepticism about 'climate change' as a whole.

It identifies seven stages in the main 'climate change' frame used by most of the media, each a source of belief/disbelief:

- Existence – could the models be right? Could large scale human induced climate change exist?
- Consequence – if it did exist, would that really matter?
- Detection – can we find signs that the forecast climate change is really happening – a 'signal'?
- Attribution – if it's happening, can we find a 'fingerprint' of human influence?
- Response – should we respond politically, eg by international government action, and socially and individually, by changing the technologies we use and the lives we lead ?
- Feasibility – are the proposed solutions actually doable, technologically, economically, organisationally, politically?
- Efficacy – if we are trying them, are they really working?

Taking poll results from one basis of 'belief' or 'disbelief' and implying that it reads across to the whole, or to the most fundamental doubts, allows journalists to create more dramatic stories because they make campaigns or pro-climate government policies look out of step with 'the public'. This sleight of hand or sloppiness is important because while numerous polls show that 'the public' overwhelmingly believes human-induced climate change to be real, the reiteration of doubt in the media discourages action.

The study also presents data from two surveys in 2001 and 2007 by CDSM Cultural Dynamics Strategy and Marketing, which asked several relevant questions, and breaks down the results across the three main Maslowian motivational segments of Security-Driven 'Settlers', esteem-driven 'Prospectors' and inner-directed Pioneers.

On the questions it poses about the 'state of the natural environment', overall only a very small part of the population is in any way 'sceptical'. It also shows that for that small minority (1.8 – 8.8% of the population) on questions about whether it is 'too late' to do anything about climate change, or 'it's not as dangerous as it's made out to be', and 'I'm not concerned', the Security-Driven part of the population is increasingly heavily over-represented. This conservative, traditional, local-oriented, fatalistic and acquiescent part of the population is small to start with (20% in the UK) and shrinking. Socially it exerts no trend-setting effect on other parts of the population. "Left to social processes the skepticism revealed by these questions would be expected to gradually die out" says the study.

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However that's without the influence of the media. Press, tv and radio can use the sceptical 'average joe' or 'untutored man on the street' represented by this group to stand up stories that try to paint the population as a whole as 'disbelieving', for example by using them as 'vox pop' voices and connecting that to the larger doubt that exists not about whether climate change exists but, for instance, about whether effective action is being taken to combat it.

The paper warns that the very small 'contrarian' minority element amongst the Pioneers – who are media savvy, interested in 'interesting questions' and tend to be life's 'natural' iconoclasts – will exert a disproportionate influence on the national debate by organising media debates and both seeding and feeding doubt amongst the rest of the population. While their motivation is intellectual and almost playful, it helps sustain a conversation of doubt and that discourages politicians from across-the-board mandatory action on climate, which itself defers action amongst both the Settlers and Prospectors – the first because there is no authority leadership, and the second because of unresolved controversy and the risk of 'getting it wrong' socially.

Because politicians use polls to assess public opinion, which they seek to 'stay in step with', and because the media depiction of climate change scepticism often uses polling in a naive or wantonly naive way, a negative feedback is created in which media exaggeration of scepticism discourages political action which in turn encourages climate lethargy.

The paper also argues that the inner-directed Pioneers are also the source of two other small but problematic groups for anyone trying to advance climate action. Some early actors will have tried personal action but now despair at persuading enough people to do likewise – hence they become 'despairers', despairing of effective action. If they are climate scientists or disenchanted campaigners then their views may carry in the media and have a wider impact. For them the paper advocates 'remedial' action – showing them that social and technological change is feasible.

The other problematic Pioneers are the ethical-arguers, the 'Concerned Ethicals' who campaign by trying to show the bigger picture, the need for personal change on ethical grounds, as has been discussed in previous editions of this newsletter. Their approach particularly annoys Prospectors.

Regarding the 40% esteem (success) seeking Prospectors, the paper suggests they are "are caught in a dilemma between wanting to keep up with the fashion of being green, and avoiding making a social mistake by getting it wrong on the controversies". It suggests that communications should disengage "'climate change' from offers or asks around behaviours which will help combat climate change. Make 'going green' aspirational and a choice of products or services endorsed by high status channels or messengers, and Prospectors can take it up as the 'right thing' to be doing. Only don't connect it to 'the climate change debate'".

It concludes that climate scepticism is marginal and not in itself a significant phenomenon in the UK but that the media magnification of scepticism, especially in relation to polling, is significant. Communicators need to pay more attention to it and to adopt a differentiated strategy for dealing with it.

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Occupying Story Space

Many campaigns involve trying to 'occupy' space in the media conversation. As countless media analyses show, there are a number of elements to any 'story'. Sometimes campaigners are satisfied simply to appear in a story, or to cause it to be covered at all. To gain maximum effect however campaigns should seek to occupy as much of the story as possible without denying the media their essential role – ie one that the media finds professionally acceptable.

For example a 'story' might include elements or roles such as:

- An event which is reported
- A fact which is 'important' – typically cited as a reinforcing 'proof'
- An analysis (often a process in which an 'expert' pronounces)
- A synthesis (in a long piece eg with several experts involved – bringing it together)
- The meaning – the explanation of what it means in 'our terms' where the report or reporter identifies with the viewer, listener or audience

The more of these positions which the campaign group occupies, the bigger its impact is likely to be.

In a story where a group causes only the event to take place, it is often at the mercy of many other voices as to what it means. This is the classic vanguardist campaign problem – those involved 'understand' it to mean one thing but the audiences understand something else and the effect is therefore not what the campaigners hope for.

Slightly cleverer campaigning will involve preparatory work to ensure that a 'meaning' is already widespread as a latent idea so that the media will uncover that once the event triggers the creation of 'the story'.

Use of visual language (ie in pictures of the event) in which there is little need to provide interpretation but where the visual communication is so compelling that it gets carried in the media with minimal comment, is perhaps the best way around this.

Opportunistic campaigners who do not create events but seek to exploit them to give their opinions are often disappointed by trying to become influential interpreters of meaning. More likely they become one 'voice' which is used to triangulate an issue (ie a discounted extreme) with the media ultimately providing their own spin of meaning on it either through their own voice or a proxy.

Creating events in which it is self-evident that your campaign has enormous resonance with the public has the effect of largely removing the role of assigning 'meaning'. In this case 'the people' have decided what it means and reporters are reduced to reporting. In this instance the campaigners are really 'in control' although without having to engage in much argument at all. An interesting example is where the forces of law and order ostensibly deployed against protestors take their side, as in some human rights, civil rights or 'revolutionary' events, and in a small way in the recent demonstrations against the expansion of Heathrow Airport in London.

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Resources

The Environmental Funders Network is ostensibly aimed at educating and helping foundations to give grants to campaign groups and others but it has a lot of useful resources listed at the site under headings such as 'challenges within environmentalism' and 'communications strategy, campaign planning and social values'. A recent report tracks where the money went from all major environmental grant givers.

<http://www.greenfunders.org>

Mind The Gap

The antithesis of boring statistics. Or more fun stats anyway. Gapminder is at

<http://www.gapminder.org/>

For example: *"In this first GapCast, Professor Hans Rosling shows how economic growth, public health and sexual rights have changed in Sweden during 300 years. In only 6 minutes he shows life expectancy and GDP per capita of Sweden from 1709 to 2004. 300 years of Swedish progress covers today's disparity from Sierra Leone to Japan. Whereas education of midwives started in 1709 it was only in the 1970s that family planning was included in their training. Sexual rights came late in Sweden compared to progress in health and wealth".* So there you are.

And *'Gapminder World 2006: Choose between a number of indicators, select which countries you want to show and then see the development over time'* – actually well worth looking at. Honestly.

Outcomes

Many campaigns find it hard to identify real-world outcomes, or even to track relevant changes. Here's an interesting indicator – although it can't be attributed to any specific campaign that I know of. The UK *Daily Mail* reported on 13 June 2007 (Clothes peg sales soar as people turn their backs on tumble dryers, Sean Poulter):

"Families are turning back the clock and pegging out their washing to save money - and the planet. A leading supermarket has seen a 1,400 per cent increase in the sale of pegs in the first four months of 2007, compared with a year ago. Sales of washing lines and rotary dryers are up by 147 per cent. The move appears to reflect a desire to reduce reliance on tumble dryers, which use huge amounts of energy, so contributing to the release of carbon and climate change."

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