

# NARRATIVE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## Working Document

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The policy move to deliberation and dialogue is very welcome. However, it is still the case that people are receiving mixed messages about what to do about climate change. There are many contradictions, including the clash between consumerism and economic growth, on the one hand, and using less energy/resources and shopping sustainably, on the other. People are confused when opposing messages come from different government departments, and business and industry stakeholders. All this at a time when trust levels in politicians, government, the media, and academia are steadily eroding.

Therefore, a clear narrative around climate action needs to be created, voiced and heard. It may not be the answer to the problem, but an effective narrative needs to be part of the solution.

Over the years, a number of films and documentaries have grappled with the challenge of conveying the seriousness of climate change to the public, in the hope that they will be spurred into action. These include Al Gore's 'An Inconvenient Truth' (2006) and 'An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power' (2017), and Leonardo DiCaprio's '11<sup>th</sup> Hour' (2007) and 'Before The Flood' (2016), all of which give doom-laden facts and figures, interview experts, and provide vivid footage of negative climate impacts, with a view to encouraging people to change their ways. The 'Chasing Ice' (2012) documentary uses time lapse cameras to show the dramatic melting of the world's glaciers, again with the message that we need to act before it is too late. The British film 'The Age of Stupid' (2009) takes an even darker approach, basing the narrative in the devastated future world of 2055 with the actor Peter Postlethwaite asking, '*Why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?*'. The producers of 'An Inconvenient Truth' released a more inspiring documentary 'Climate of Change' (2010) featuring the efforts being made by ordinary people around the world to save our environment. Similarly, in 'Time to Choose' (2016), the Oscar winning documentary maker, Charles Ferguson, focused on the power of available solutions, whereby avoiding the conclusion that we're doomed!

However, despite these worthy endeavours, the general public is far more likely to have been introduced to the terrifying implications of climate change by watching Kevin Costner battle his way around a world that has been submerged by melting icecaps in 'Waterworld' (1995), or by following Denis Quaid's ordeal in 'The Day After Tomorrow' (2004) as he tries to reach his son trapped in a sudden international storm which plunges the planet into a new Ice Age.

Many policy makers and campaigners also understandably feel they have a duty to warn people of the dangers of climate change and to tell them how bad it could get if we do nothing. However, apart from not being effective, such dire warnings can backfire.

In 2010, two UK government press advertisements using nursery rhymes to raise awareness of climate change were banned by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), after 939 complaints were received from members of the public (BBC, 2010). The ASA concluded that the adverts made exaggerated claims about the threat of climate change to Britain, and were not backed up by solid science. One depicted three men floating in a bathtub in a submerged landscape and read: '*Rub a dub, three men in a tub, a necessary course of action due to flash flooding caused by climate change*'. It then explained: '*Climate*

*change is happening. Temperature and sea levels are rising. Extreme weather events such as storms, floods and heat waves will become more frequent and intense. If we carry on at this rate, life in 25 years could be very different.* The other advertisement showed two children looking into a stone well in a barren setting *'Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water. There was none as extreme weather due to climate change had caused a drought'*. The ASA claimed that both predictions should have been phrased more tentatively. Complaints against a related TV commercial depicting a young child in bed being read a nightmarish story by her father about the impacts of climate change were not upheld.

In September 2009, the 10:10 campaign, supported by the UK government and the Guardian and Observer newspapers, was launched in the UK (Adam, 2009), with the aim of encouraging participants to cut their carbon emissions by 10% by the end of 2010. The initiative was the brainchild of Franny Armstrong, director of the 'Age of Stupid', and included a short 4-minute film (*No Pressure*, 2010) co-written with Richard Curtis, writer of 'Love Actually' and 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'. The film was intended for cinema and TV audiences, but had to be withdrawn on the day of its release because of a public outcry. The black humour storyline involved graphic scenes of school children, men and women, who were not sufficiently enthusiastic about the 10:10 campaign to reduce greenhouse emissions, being blown up, with blood and body parts flying!

Most of the films listed above also fall into the trap of hair-shirt and negative messaging. Yet, to date, notions of 'cutting back', 'living lightly' and 'doing without' have not spurred many people into climate action. Neither have negative and pessimistic themes. Which is logical. After all, Martin Luther King didn't stir people into action by proclaiming *'I have a nightmare'* (Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 2005).

Threat information causes constructive responses and persistent attitude change only when people feel personally vulnerable to the risk, when they know what to do about it, when the cost is acceptable, and they feel that their response will be effective in solving the problem. If a person's reaction is emotional and only aims to control the fear or pain without reducing the danger, it is deemed maladaptive. Avoidant behaviours include denying the threat or its impact, blaming others, rationalising that silver-bullet solutions will be found, refusing to do anything different, and succumbing to apathy (Moser and Dilling, 2007). Negative messaging can lead to an approach called *'settlerdom'*, whereby the alarmist discourse is ridiculed and rejected, the notion of climate change is deemed so preposterous it cannot be real, and a *'common sense'* attitude is invoked to counteract those doomsayers (Ereaut and Segnit, 2006). Some call it *'climate porn'* (Retallack, 2006), in that the apocalyptic language offers a terrifying, and perhaps secretly thrilling, spectacle, but ultimately makes the issue appear unreal and distances the public from the problem. When the 'we're all going to die' approach is coupled with '10 things you can do to save the planet', people can be forgiven for thinking 'why bother?'

People need a positive hopeful vision, and a plan that makes them feel more in control and better able to address the climate crisis. They need a vision that isn't hopelessly unobtainable, and which doesn't necessarily involve grinding sacrifice. This vision requires a mood of gratitude, joy and pride, not one of sadness, fear and regret (Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 2007). Hope for a better future is a cross-cultural characteristic of the human race (Kaplan 2000). Negative emotions and the patterns of thoughts and behaviour they trigger, are powerful, contaminating and contagious, and they can curtail engagement. For people and communities to function they need to experience a ratio of three parts positivity to one-part negativity. For everyone to flourish, the ratio should be increased to five to one (Gaffney, 2011).

As Lakoff suggests, “*the facts bounce off*”. People think in ‘frames’ and, to be accepted, the truth must fit into their frame (Lakoff, 2004). Messages should portray the possible benefits of climate action, such as positive changes in lifestyle and subsequent improvements in quality of life, rather than sacrifice or fear appeals. Framing a task in terms of winning rather than losing has a measurable effect on people’s response (Tversky and Kahneman, 1985). When primed with motivational frames, intentions of respondents to change their behaviour around climate change were significantly stronger than those who received sacrifice priming (Gifford and Comeau, 2011, Jackson, 2005). However, in any message, there needs to be a balance between optimism and pessimism. Too much positivity, or ‘brightsiding’ (Ehrenreich, 2009), can mean that people lose touch with reality and the depth of the challenge.

We tend to treat people as a homogeneous group who will hear and respond to messages in the same way. But reality is very different. People have different mindsets, and they hold diverse ideological and world views. Issues are not seen only on their merits, but rather get filtered through each person’s belief system. For instance, US Democrats are far more likely to believe in climate change than their Republican counterparts. A well-established segmentation model (Retallack and Lockwood, 2007) identifies three broad motivational groups – *Pioneers*, *Prospectors* and *Settlers* - covering the general population. Each group has its own emotional needs and very different attitudes towards risk. *Pioneers* are the forerunners of change, the early adopters, who are strongly motivated by ethical concerns and stimulated by new ideas and ways of doing things. They like variety, discovery and the unknown, and are not worried about status. *Prospectors* are the status seekers who place a high value on success and wealth. They scale things up, become managers and follow fashion. They like earning and spending money and see the world as a big opportunity. Prospectors tend to be ambitious - position and power are important to them. *Settlers* are the security and sustenance driven people, who are more concerned with their home-base, tradition and belonging. They look backwards, to yesteryear (which was better) and dislike change, as this threatens their sense of belonging, security and safety. Financial security is of high importance, and money is spent cautiously.

When it comes to narrative and climate change, different messages will be required for different mindsets. While it is clear that many people are inspired by a visionary approach, and they don’t want to be dragged back into the past, this may work more for pioneers and prospectors rather than settlers, and for liberals more than conservatives. Conservatives tend to focus more on the past because they see it as being better than the present. Therefore, an argument that encourages a return to the past will be appealing. Any proposed changes to society that are rooted in past comparisons will avoid being tainted by the negative associations conservatives have for progressive or future focused changes (Baldwin and Lammers, 2016). The UK based Climate Outreach & Information Network claims that ‘*there is a vacuum where a coherent and compelling conservative narrative on climate change should be*’ and that it is time that climate change should be lifted ‘*out of its left-wing ghetto and into the mainstream.*’ Their report identifies four narratives for engaging centre-right audiences more effectively: localism; energy security; the green economy/‘new’ environmentalism; and the Good Life (Corner, 2013).

In Ireland, government media campaigns around climate change and energy efficiency, to date, have largely avoided the negative messaging pitfalls, but have fallen into the trap of primarily providing information and education to individuals in the hope that this will result in them taking steps to cut their own emissions.

In September 2006, Noel Dempsey, then Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources launched the two year Power of One campaign (Enviro-Solutions, 2018), designed to encourage energy efficiency, and to highlight what individuals can practically do to cut their own wasteful energy

consumption. The main objectives of the campaign were to create awareness of the types of energy, their costs and environmental impacts, to provide relevant information, to encourage individual daily responses, and to empower individuals to recognize their role and to act collectively. The national campaign was co-ordinated by the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, with Sustainable Energy Ireland, and involved the ESB, Bord Gáis, EirGrid, Airtricity and the Department of Transport. It was designed to target multiple audiences, including households, SMEs, the public sector, and the transport sector. The campaign, which was fronted by well-known TV presenter, Daithí O'Sé involved a mass advertising campaign, a series of TV ads, a wide ranging PR campaign to communicate the key energy efficiency messages, and information and education programmes. A media initiative called 'The Power of One Street' was also run, which involved the monitoring and coaching of families, schools and businesses around the country and was filmed by RTE's Six One News on a monthly basis.

In 2008, RTE linked up with Aodhan MacPhaidin and Kirk Shanks from the Power of One campaign to screen a green reality show called 'My Family Aren't Wasters' (RTE, 2008) in which two families, the Moriartys in Listowel and the Quinlans in Dublin, with large carbon footprints and high energy costs, were challenged to make considerable changes to their lifestyles.

Research analyzing the effects of the Power of One campaign on natural gas consumption (Diffney et al., 2013) concluded that the campaign influenced awareness of the savings associated with a reduction of the thermostat setting and the short-run heating behaviour, but had no persistent impact on longer-term behaviour. Power of One leaflets included in customers' bills helped reduce consumption in the short run but there were no further effects in the second year. Results did not show any significant effect for the TV campaign, either in its first or second year. Self-reported heating behaviour had not changed after the first year of the campaign.

In April 2008, John Gormley, then Minister for the Environment, launched the €15 million multi-faceted awareness campaign, called 'Change', which included the development of a carbon management tool for business, and an information website where members of the public could calculate their own carbon emissions (McGee, 2008). Avoiding the portrayal of doomsday scenarios, a TV advertisement featured a range of key figures and historic events in Irish history – Eamon DeValera and Michael Collins at the first Dail, Irish emigrants to America, Irish troops in the Lebanon and Irish aid workers in Sudan in the 1980s (Hogan, 2008). There is very little on-line information on, or evaluation of, this campaign.

Both of the above campaigns focused on the individual and on individual households. Focusing on citizens in isolation, as well as being less effective, deflects attention away from institutions and the part they play in defining which actions are easier, and more likely, than others. People want to see government and businesses leading by example. They feel defensive and frustrated when responsibility and blame appears to be laid on their shoulders, and when they are being given mixed messages from people in power. Therefore, changes being made by those in leadership roles should be visible, credible and on-going. People also want to know that their actions will make a difference, and they do not want to act alone. They feel helpless when faced with the enormity of the task, so need to know that they are part of a bigger picture – this requires leadership, direction, and the sense of a movement - 'we're all in this together' (DECC, 2009, Balta-Ozkan et al., 2013).

Bearing in mind time constraints, and the inherent difficulties in changing behaviour, regulation will probably have to be part of any multi-pronged policy approach. One of the main reasons government is reluctant to regulate is because it fears a negative public backlash. However, it is argued (Ockwell et al., 2009) that government regulation which '*forces people to be green*' is consistent with public

expectations for the government to take action on climate change. It can help address the “free-rider” effect, reduce the attitude-behavior gap in that people have to change their behavior regardless, and it can provide an incentive for social innovation. While people may not be happy about an impending tax or legislative change, research on issues like congestion charges and smoking bans shows that they become more acceptable after implementation. However, such an attitudinal shift may only happen if the policy already has a certain level of support, is easy to adapt to, and has tangible benefits (Poortinga et al., 2013). If compelling people to change is likely to create a political backlash, an alternative approach (Ockwell et al., 2009) could be to use ‘*politically and psychologically smart*’ communication strategies to foster social demand for, and acceptance of, the necessary regulatory measures, and at the same time encouraging grass-roots action. Lessons can be learnt from the recent water charges controversy, and also from the 2002 plastic bag tax, which reduced plastic bag use in retail outlets by more than 90%, and is ‘*so popular with the Irish public that it would be politically damaging to remove it*’ (Convery et al., 2007)

The time is ripe for a narrative which will help to shift people’s consciousness. After all, as Albert Einstein famously said, ‘*no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it*’.

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