TITLE:

Communicating “inconvenient truths”: emotion and political communication

Author

Don McArthur

Email address: dcmca1@student.monash.edu

Affiliation

Masters student, Monash University

Abstract

Recent research on the role played by emotion in shaping attitudes to climate change (Norgaard 2011) raises major questions for how we think about social movement communication. While there is a growing body of research on emotion and social movements, little work has been done to examine emotion as an obstacle to movement mobilisation and public engagement. Fragmented bodies of literature about political communication variously emphasise the roles of psychological factors, marketing, frames, values and symbolic politics. The literature of these fields provides useful frameworks for examining social movement communication, however the challenges posed by Norgaard call for new thinking about how social movements can communicate effectively in response to climate change.

Keywords:

climate change, emotions, social movement, framing, marketing, political communication

Biographical note:

Don McArthur is studying a Research Masters at the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, focusing on Climate Change Communication. He has a background in Human Rights Education, Peace Education and Development Education at a number of NGOs and is involved in the climate movement.
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Abstract

Recent research on the role played by emotion in shaping attitudes to climate change (Norgaard 2011) raises major questions for how we think about social movement communication. While there is a growing body of research on emotion and social movements, little work has been done to examine emotion as an obstacle to movement mobilisation and public engagement. Fragmented bodies of literature about political communication variously emphasise the roles of psychological factors, marketing, frames, values and symbolic politics. The literature of these fields provides useful frameworks for examining social movement communication, however the challenges posed by Norgaard call for new thinking about how social movements can communicate effectively in response to climate change.

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Setting the scene: climate change and emotion

The Norwegian winter of 2000-2001 was unusually warm. The first snowfall came two months late. The local lake failed to freeze, so ice fishing was impossible, and the ski industry had to resort to using artificial snow. There was widespread media coverage linking the weather conditions explicitly to global warming, yet there was no upsurge in writing of letters to the editor or lobbying politicians, and no decrease in vehicle use.

Sociologist Kari Norgaard visited Norway to discuss climate change with residents of the Bydgaby (a fictionalised name for a real town.) Arne, a man in his early fifties, commented, “Basically, I think that people are worried about climate change. They don’t know rightly what to say.” Eirik, who described feeling a sense of personal responsibility for climate change, reflected
…we hear a fair amount [about climate change] in the newspapers… people have the sense that they are collectively responsible… At the same time I think that there are many who, we don’t care, we’ll close our eyes to it…

Kari: And why do you think that is?

Eirek: They have to choose what to become engaged with, and these unpleasant things they decide not to become involved with, I can imagine.

_Eirek referred to the many pressures on peoples’ time, and explained_

I see that we do lots of things that most certainly cannot continue. It will work for a while, but sooner or later it isn't going to work. So I am worried in any case for that which will happen. (Norgaard, 2011: n.p.)

_Norgaard’s book “Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life” foregrounds the role of emotion in shaping responses to climate change. She shares the now widely-argued view that a lack of information about climate change is not the problem, observing that “information deficit models” fail to account for the behaviour of those who believe in global warming, and express concern about it. Norgaard maintains that understanding emotion is central to understanding the social processes that shape responses to climate change. She reflects:_

Information from climate scientists about global warming is highly disturbing. It challenges the basics of our social organization and raises questions about future
quality of life and human survival.

Norgaard lists the following emotions as being associated with thinking about climate change: fear of loss of ontological security, helplessness, guilt, and a sense of threat to individual and collective sense of identity. She describes a “pattern of knowing and not knowing, seeing but not seeing” in response to climate change. She recalls Nina Eliasoph's description of the way in which volunteers in interviews “managed both to see the problems and to turn away from them, describing them in lavish detail while simultaneously avoiding them” (1998: 70).”

This paper takes Norgaard’s research and the literature of climate communication as a starting point for taking stock of current approaches to political communication. The literatures of fields such as framing and social movements, emotion and social movements, symbolic politics, marketing and political communication provide useful frameworks for examining emotion and social movement communication, however the challenges posed by Norgaard may require new thinking about how social movements can communicate effectively.

A number of authors share Norgaard’s analysis of emotion and politics. Hamilton observes
The climate predictions are frightening. Those who listen to them feel anxiety, fear, rage, guilt, anguish, helplessness, hope and apathy… What’s going on in the psyche? How do we cope with this profound threat to our conception of the future? (Hamilton, 2009: n.p.)

Hamilton and Kasser (2009) draw on social psychology to map a range of strategies humans are likely to adopt in the face of global warming, noting the way in which coping strategies are designed to defend against or manage unpleasant emotions. Moser’s (2007) perspective is similar. While highlighting the often-unacknowledged positive side of emotions, she maintains that “unhampered or unattended to, feelings can also paralyse or mislead us.”

The state of the climate debate is often attributed to media coverage and in turn to the power of fossil fuel interests. Here, Hamilton’s observations are significant:

the conservative counter-movement’s success in undermining climate science and slowing policy responses would not have been possible unless it had been able to exploit a weakness in the popular psyche – the desire to discount or disbelieve the warnings of scientists… It is not so much the fanaticism of the small minority of active deniers that concerns us, but the vulnerability of the majority to their influence. (Hamilton 2012.)

Hamilton’s point has broad implications for how we understand climate politics. Is “the
“problem” located “out there” among the owners of mining and media companies, or does at least part of the problem belong with the public at large, who willingly if often “blindly” follow along?

Emotion and academic literature

Engelken-Jorge (2011) discusses how academic literature has largely disregarded emotion, or seen it as a threat to a rational, ordered society. A focus on emotion has been marginalised by behaviourist approaches, and by understandings of politics as a matter of power and competing interests. Writing about passion, Hall (2002) argues that common liberal approaches are inadequate because they “stem from impoverished conceptions of passion and, as a consequence, lead to impoverished approaches to politics.” (736) Norgaard puts the challenge for researchers in these terms:

If emotion and cognition are linked, it would seem important not to skip over them. Yet few scholars have paid attention to emotions and climate change or to the role of emotion in preventing action… emotions are missing from the current scholarly discussion about nonresponse.

Jasper (2011: 2) writes of an “emerging subfield” of emotions and social movements. He sees plenty of room for further research, arguing that “virtually all the cultural models and concepts currently in use (e.g., frames, identities, narratives) are misspecified if they do not include explicit emotional causal mechanisms. Yet few of them do.” (2) He calls
for research on issues including the emotional constraints on social movements, the emotions of players other than protestors, and the rethinking of existing concepts in order to find emotional processes hidden inside them.

**Political communication**

The political communication literature has generally been oriented toward election campaigns and outcomes to the exclusion of other forms of political communication, including social movement communication (Graber and Smith 2005). Ryfe (2001) surveys the emergence of political communication as a field, noting the influence of social psychology, quantitative approaches and an emphasis on developing generalisable statements about the effects of media communication on electoral politics. Graber and Smith criticise the “spottiness” and limited breadth of political communication research and offer a list of areas for research which would give political communication scholars “better insight into neglected aspects of the field that are especially relevant for 21st-century political problems.” Crompton addresses a different kind of gap in communication literature: the prevalence of marketing and how this has excluded insights from politics. His work “draws not on analogies from marketing, but rather from political strategy.” (2008: 7.)

**Marketing**

Marketing has become prevalent in the strategies adopted by NGOs and civil society organisations as part of a broader shift in the professionalisation of political
communication since the 1980s, when “political marketing” first emerged (Luca 2010). Like any field, marketing includes a range of sub-disciplines such as Social Marketing (Donovan and Henley 2010, Lefebvre, 2010) Critical Marketing (Saren, 2007) and more recently Critical Social Marketing (Gordon, 2011) While there is no single “marketing approach”, marketing approaches tend to focus communication on individual and behavioural levels.

For Chris Rose, a strategic adviser to Greenpeace International, the insights of marketing provide a way for environmentalists to reach people who see the world in quite different ways to themselves. Rose argues that in any society there are three ‘types’ of people: settlers (people with an unmet need for safety, security, identity or belonging); prospectors (people with an unmet need for esteem of others or self-esteem) and pioneers (people with an unmet need for exploring ethics, new ideas and connecting action to values.) Rose argues that campaigns for change are generally run by “pioneers” and framed in their terms. Opposition to these campaigns mainly comes from “prospectors” and “settlers”. Rose suggests that prospectors are best engaged through activities that are preferably non-controversial, discrete, uncomplicated… and above all, enable people undertaking the activity to be in some way successful, look good, and feel good… The activities therefore need to be… rewarding in terms of credit, winning, succeeding and being positively received. Preferred actions include shopping/ purchasing. (2013: 7)

Another marketing approach is evident in the work of Ereaut and Segnit (2006). Calling
on climate communicators to harness tools and concepts used by brand advertisers, they propose approaching positive climate behaviours “in the same way as marketers approach acts of buying and consuming… It amounts to treating climate-friendly everyday activity as a brand that can be sold… ”(28)

Crompton (2008, 14: 26-7) characterises the marketing approach as relying on:

• ‘small steps’, often in the expectation that these will lead individuals to engage in more significant behavioural changes.
• the ‘commodification’ of behaviours
• audience segmentation; either by socio-economic criteria, or according to audience motivations
• the role of self-interest as a motivation for behavioural change.

He argues that while a marketing approach is effective at “generating piecemeal change where this is at its most painless,”(8) it is not suited to the kind of change that environmental NGOs want to achieve. He credits marketers with a focus on values as drivers of behavioural choices and with attentiveness to the need to communicate with different people in different ways, but he cautions against constraining communications according to “those motivations which currently dominate within a particular audience.”(6)

**Values and Frames**

Crompton and his colleagues in the UK-based organisation Common Cause offer the “values and frames” approach as an alternative to marketing. Crompton reflects
Successful political movements recognise the dangers of tailoring political messages to appeal to the values of specific audiences. They recognise this because they are not simply concerned to ‘sell a product’; they are concerned to establish and foster loyalty to a political programme. (Crompton 2008: 26)

Darnton and Kirk (2011) are particularly critical of efforts to appeal to peoples’ existing values. They argue that appeals to self-interest diminish the sense of a common good. In their model, “activating” values such as achievement and power involves suppressing positive values. They argue that efforts to widen or extend public engagement should “appeal primarily or even exclusively to people’s self-transcendent motivations. If we appeal to their self-interest, they will only become more self-interested.” (2011: 9,7)

The “Values and Frames” approach suggests that transformational change can be achieved by “activating” and reinforcing the positive values which people already hold. Darnton and Kirk acknowledge however that the evidence base for how frames change values is weak. (8) Many of the studies they cite as evidence rely on generalising from social psychology laboratory experiments to wider social phenomena. Whether such generalizations consistently hold, however, is open to question.

**Framing**

Framing perspectives, with their focus on how movements give meaning to the issues that they address, have become central to contemporary social movement theory (Benford and Snow, 2000, Francesca and Ho, 2006.) The framing approach provides a “map” of the
task of social movement communication, including *diagnostic* framing: the identification of a problem and its cause; *prognostic* framing: the articulation of a solution; and *motivational* framing: the use of frames to motivate people to support a social movement. (Benford and Snow 2000.)

The literature on “frame alignment” and “frame resonance” (e.g. Snow et al. 1986) addresses questions of persuasion. “Frame alignment” refers to the means by which frames resonate with audiences. It includes: *frame bridging* - “bridging” previously unconnected frames that are ideologically aligned; *frame amplification* - clarifying and “amplifying” the meaning of existing frames; *frame extension* - giving new meaning to a frame by highlighting is congruence with the values of an audience; and *frame transformation* - cultivating new values and leaving behind old meanings.

The value and utility of the framing perspective in social movement research is clear: it has “brought meaning back in” and provided a basis for describing and investigating social movement communication. Despite this, does the language of frame alignment, frame resonance and credibility, salience and narrative fidelity (Benford and Snow 1988; 2000) provide the resources that are needed to address the challenges Norgaard poses? Narrative fidelity, also known as “cultural resonance” seems to offer the most promising angle for understanding emotion and persuasion, however even it is “framed” in terms of “external” cultural narratives rather than internal emotional processes.

Polletta and Ho (2006: 197) observe that the literature on frames and social movements
“remains thin on the relations between frames and their political and cultural contexts.” Arguing that we do not know enough about “why activists choose the frames they do, what aspects of the environment shape frames’ effectiveness, and what impacts frames have on institutions outside the movement,” they call for a more sophisticated understanding of persuasion.

Symbolic politics

In her work “Hearts and Minds: Bringing Symbolic Politics Back In (1995), Brysk calls for a renewed focus on the ways in which symbolic politics contributes to social change. For Brysk, symbolic politics is about the ways in which meaning shapes social movement mobilisation and societal transformation. She criticises rational actor, materialist and positivist models of collective action, describing instead a “meaning-seeking, frame-producing actor.”

We think about politics in stories, and our consciousness is changed when new stories persuade us to adopt a new paradigm. Collective action itself then involves a kind of storytelling or political theater, performing the new paradigm to persuade others. Stories that work rewrite history because they contain the elements of successful communication-legitimate speakers, compelling messages, and satisfying plots. (561)

Brysk was writing before the “affective turn” gained momentum, and her 1995 work does
not emphasise emotion. By contrast, symbolic politics and emotion are integrated in the work of Edelman (1985) and Sears (2001). Sears maintains that political symbols rivet our attention and evoke strong emotion, and suggests that affectively-loaded symbols (e.g. “communists” “welfare” “blacks”) account for attitudinal differences. Researching the power and dynamics of symbolic communication may offer much in understanding ways of “reaching” people when “the facts” are not enough.

**Conclusion**

The climate change debate raises major challenges for social movements in communicating messages that many are resistant to hearing. Prevailing models for political communication offer valuable insights, however it is difficult to find models that take account of the issues highlighted by Norgaard and other writers on emotion in politics. The factors identified by Norgaard are often placed to one side, or noted without their ramifications being explored directly and analytically as well as descriptively.¹

The picture emerging from the discussion above is one of fragmented bodies of literature which could inform each other but in many cases do not. The literature of emotion and social movements addresses emotion as a source of motivation, however has not addressed emotion as a block to mobilisation. Much of the literature of climate change communication is grounded in marketing and social psychology and focuses on individual behaviour change rather than addressing political culture. The literature of marketing is attentive to emotion however it also tends to focus on individual behaviour
change, and takes commercial marketing as its frame of reference. The literature of framing and social movements is grounded in cognitive psychology and is relatively silent on emotion as a factor. Psychoanalytic literature (e.g. Weintrobe 2012) offers rich insights into emotion and attitudes, and is strong on “diagnosis”, however it offers only limited insights into possible social movement strategies. Much of the literature of symbolic politics precedes the affective turn in the social sciences and does not engage with emotion.

Cultural sociology is one field that does offer avenues to examine these issues. Alexander (2003) writes that collective emotions and ideas are central to the methods of cultural sociology precisely because

it is such subjective and internal feelings that so often seem to rule the world.

Socially constructed subjectivity forms the will of collectivities; shapes the rules of organizations; defines the moral substance of law; and provides the meaning and motivation for technologies, economies and military machines.”(5)

While there are consistent references to emotion in Alexander’s writings, emotion does not appear to be a central category in his thought. (It is absent from the index entries of several of his major works.) Further, there is only limited literature on climate change communication from a cultural sociology perspective.

The challenges posed by Norgaard and the current state of the climate debate call for new
thinking on approaches to social movement communication. While the dynamics of climate change politics are clearly unique and unprecedented, the challenge of “reaching” people with a message many do not want to hear is not new. What does the history of social movements have to say about these challenges?
References


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1 For an important resource on climate communication, see Moser and Dilling (2007.) The role of emotion is widely acknowledged, and the suggestions for ways forward are rich and valuable, however there is nothing like a full treatment of the issues raised by Norgaard and Hamilton.