

# Encouraging pro-environmental and adaptive behaviour change through tailored communications

N. C. McLoughlin (PhD Environment, Energy and Resilience, Department of Psychology, University of Bath)  
Supervisors: Dr. Ian Walker (Bath, Psychology); Prof. Patrick Devine-Wright (Exeter, Geography)



## Background and Rationale

How can **communications** influence the way we think, behave and adapt to the challenges posed by climate change and other environmental issues? How can we encourage more sustainable lifestyles? What imagery evokes the strongest emotions? How might environmental information be tailored to contrasting social and cultural contexts?

**Pro-environmental communications** is a recent, but rapidly growing area of interdisciplinary, pragmatic research, aiming to:

- Alert and educate the public about environmental issues
- Encourage pro-environmental behaviour
- Contribute to emissions reduction targets
- Reduce community vulnerability by improving adaption and community resilience
- Encourage public policy and technology acceptance

(see: Lieserowitz, 2009; Klöckner, 2015, Whitmarsh *et al.* 2013).

However, there are complex psychological barriers that hinder engagement (e.g. social norms, the 'values-behaviour gap', ideological reasoning and psychological distancing) and most previous research has focused on developed, western cultural contexts (Corner *et al.* 2014; Whitmarsh *et al.* 2013).



## The Big Picture: Systems Theory Framework

The cyberneticist Gregory Bateson remarked that “**information is a difference that makes a difference**” (1972, 459), and highlighted that the human mind and environment are not distinct, but part of the same feedback loop, or dynamic system.

In this way, communications, social actors and the environment (like the climate system itself) feed back and influence one another. Environmental communications therefore offer a hybrid '**third space**', influencing and dissolving the tensions of unhelpful, yet persistent binary dualisms, such as:

- The human mind vs. the external environment
- Norms that govern public (experiential) vs. expert (academic) knowledges
- Western vs. non-western environmental knowledges
- Right wing vs. left wing environmental attitudes

## Project Aims

- Consider the roles and relationships of social norms, cultural values, group processes and place attachments in communications with public(s) and power brokers.
- Better understand the links between communications, community resilience and policy changes in the face of adaptive challenges.
- Test and compare communications strategies in contrasting cultural contexts (UK and Nepal).
- Design creative and engaging public engagement activities surrounding this research (including a short documentary, and art-based events).
- Utilise mixed methods and novel communications tools.

## Pilot Research: Engaging with the Centre-Right

- Used a values theory approach to investigate how climate change films might be used to engage centre-right value groups.
- Methods: key informant interviews (inc. Ben Howlett MP) and focus groups with centre-to-right wing voters.
- Films with an '**inclusive**' framing and **trusted in-group communicators** (e.g. Margaret Thatcher, Zac Goldsmith) found to be most useful when engaging the centre-right.
- '**Coproduction**' of films with centre-right groups *via* an iterative design process could be a more successful way to engage with the centre-right than more 'passive' approaches.

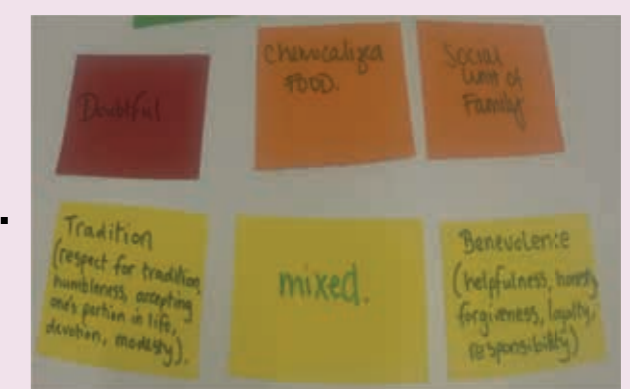


Figure 1: Values card task used to prime cultural values environment beliefs in focus groups



## Current and Future Work

- Bridging communication barriers between policymakers and the public, following the winter 2015/16 flood events in Cumbria, UK. [Method: Semi-structured interviews]
- How does positioning within a social norm (minority or majority) influence responses to behavioural criticism? [Lab experiment]
- How do the public's visualisations of the future help or hinder the perceived immutability of today's behaviours? [Online experiment]
- How can a novel 'genetic algorithm' based mobile app be used to prompt pro-environmental behaviours? [Lab experiment]

## References

- Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Corner, A., Markowitz, E., & Pidgeon, N. (2014). Public engagement with climate change: the role of human values. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews-Climate Change*, 5(3), 411-422.
- Klöckner, C. A. (2015). *The Psychology of Pro-environmental Communication: Beyond Standard Information Strategies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leiserowitz, A. (2009). Ever Heard of Climate Change? Over 40% of the world says "no". *Climate Literacy in Global Perspective: Findings from the Gallup World Poll*, Yale University [Video]
- Whitmarsh, L., O'Neill, S., & Lorenzoni, I. (2013). Public engagement with climate change: What do we know and where do we go from here? *Int. J. Media & Cultural Politics*, 9(1), 7-25.

All images: Creative Commons, [climatevisuals.org](http://climatevisuals.org) (April,2016) Image credits: Colville-Andersen, Jenny Parkins, Arne List, DFID, Wendell, Rainforest Action Network, NPS, NOAA (For further details, see: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>)