



Lights, camera . . . action? Altered attitudes and behaviour in response to the climate change film *The Age of Stupid*

Rachel A. Howell*

Centre for the Study of Environmental Change and Sustainability, School of Geosciences, The University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 November 2009
Received in revised form 30 July 2010
Accepted 7 September 2010
Available online 12 October 2010

Keywords:

Pro-environmental behaviour
Behavioural change
Climate change communications
Public attitudes
Agency
Motivation

ABSTRACT

The film *The Age of Stupid* depicts the world in 2055 devastated by climate change, combining this with documentary footage which illustrates many facets of the problems of climate change and fossil-fuel dependency. This study investigates the effects of the film on UK viewers' attitudes and behaviour through a three-stage survey. Analysis of changes in attitudes focussed particularly on respondents' concern about climate change, motivation to act, fear about the potential for catastrophe, beliefs about responsibility for action, and sense of agency. The film increased concern about climate change, motivation to act, and viewers' sense of agency, although these effects had not persisted 10–14 weeks after seeing it. It was also successful in promoting some mitigation actions and behavioural change, although respondents reported barriers to further action, such as limited options for improving home energy efficiency among those in rented accommodation. However, filmgoers were atypical of the general public in that they exhibited very high levels of concern about climate change, knowledge about how to reduce their carbon emissions, and contact with organisations campaigning about climate change, before they saw the film. The paper considers how these factors may have enabled viewers to respond to the film as they did, as well as policy implications for those seeking to develop effective climate change communications.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Individuals are responsible, through their use of household energy and personal travel, for approximately 35% of total UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and indirectly, through household final consumption expenditure, for a further 51% (ONS, 2004). Clearly, significant reductions must be made in individuals' emissions in order to meet UK targets of 80% reductions from 1990 levels by 2050. Faced with the failure of traditional information campaigns about environmental issues to promote behavioural changes among the UK public (Hinchliffe, 1996; Collins, 2004), concerned individuals and organisations have been seeking alternative ways to raise concern about climate change and promote lower-carbon lifestyles. *The Age of Stupid* is a film made with the stated intention "to turn 250 million viewers into climate activists" (AoS, 2010). It presents a dystopian vision of the future, along with documentary strands which outline many of the facets of the problem of our dependency on fossil fuels. This paper assesses the success of the film in motivating viewers to raise

awareness and lobby politicians about climate change, and to make behavioural changes to reduce their GHG emissions, and seeks to draw conclusions about the use of vivid and emotionally-engaging messages in climate change communications.

1.1. Climate change communications: information, affect and agency

Although knowledge about both the causes of climate change and means of reducing emissions is an important factor influencing pro-environmental intentions and behaviour (Bord et al., 2000; O'Connor et al., 2002; Gram-Hanssen, 2010), the 'information deficit' model of behaviour change, whereby it is assumed that the public simply need more information in order to take action, has been widely criticised as insufficient (e.g. Anable et al., 2006; Blake, 1999; Bulkeley, 2000; Owens, 2000). There is a well-documented gap between environmental attitudes (which are more amenable to change through information provision), and pro-environmental behaviour (Gatersleben et al., 2002; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). In an attempt to effectively engage the public, visual and emotionally-based appeals are frequently employed within the environmental movement (Huddy and Gunthorsdottir, 2000). Nicholson-Cole (2005, p. 258) suggests that visual media offer many advantages for communicating motivating messages,

* Tel.: +44 131 650 2532; fax: +44 131 650 2524.

E-mail addresses: r.a.howell@sms.ed.ac.uk, sr_rachel@hotmail.com.

including “the capacity to convey strong messages, making them easy to remember; condense complex information and communicate new content; provide the basis for personal thoughts and conversations, contributing to people’s memory and issue-awareness; [and] communicate ideas in an instant”. Research by Pooley and O’Connor (2000) suggests that affect – feelings about specific objects, ideas, and images – plays an important part in determining people’s attitudes and responses to environmental issues (see also Gatersleben and Appleton, 2007; Steg, 2005, who suggest that affective motives are important determinants of car use), and therefore that emotions, not just knowledge, need to be targeted by environmental education campaigns.

However, not all emotions are helpful in this context. Campaigns which appeal to fear as a motivator are problematic because fear can trigger denial, apathy, repression, anger and counterproductive defensive behaviours (such as buying a ‘high-carbon’ sports utility vehicle to protect oneself against an unpredictable environment) in response (Moser and Dilling, 2004). There is a need for a positive vision to sustain people taking climate change mitigation action because results will not be seen quickly (Moser, 2006).

Related to this is the fact that a sense of agency is one of the most important factors in determining whether people engage in pro-environmental behaviour (Gilg et al., 2005; Kaplan, 2000; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). People need to believe that they can do something about the problem, and that it is worth doing something.

The Age of Stupid is one of several attempts to harness the advantages of visual communications to raise concern about climate change through film. Others include *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), a scientifically inaccurate Hollywood disaster movie depicting sudden and catastrophic climate change, Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the documentary *Home* (2009).

A number of studies investigated the impact of *The Day After Tomorrow* on viewers, including one in the USA (Leiserowitz, 2004), two in the UK (Balmford et al., 2004; Lowe et al., 2006), one in Germany (Reusswig et al., 2004) and a Japanese study which is reported in Lowe (2006). The UK and US studies found increased levels of concern about climate change among viewers of the film (this was not investigated in the other studies), while the US, Japanese, and one UK study found that there was increased motivation to individual action among viewers, and the other studies found no change (see Lowe, 2006 for a summary of results of the five studies). Although some of the studies included a follow-up a few weeks after the initial research in order to determine whether observed effects had lasted, or to explore issues more deeply through focus groups, none of them investigated whether participants were actually taking any action that could be attributed to the effects of watching the film. There do not appear to be any studies which investigated the impact of other climate change films.

The Age of Stupid is interesting in that it combines elements found in these different types of films, weaving together fictional and documentary strands, and utilising dramatic and emotionally-charged images, factual human-interest stories, and cartoon animations in its attempt to engage viewers.

1.2. *The Age of Stupid*

The Age of Stupid is a 92-min film featuring well-known actor Pete Postlethwaite as an old man living in 2055 in a world that has been devastated by climate change. The beginning of the film shows Sydney Opera House in flames, London underwater, and millions of refugees in a primitive camp. Postlethwaite’s character is watching ‘archive’ footage from 2008 and asking, “Why didn’t we save ourselves when we had the chance?”

This narrative theme provides the framework for six interweaving documentary strands which highlight different aspects of the climate change problem. One is about a windfarm developer in England whose latest proposal is being opposed by local people; a second documents the start-up of an Indian budget airline. There are also stories about those who are facing the impacts of climate change and fossil fuel dependency, including a young woman living in poverty in the Niger Delta (an area heavily polluted by Shell), an 82-year-old French mountain guide who has seen his beloved Alpine glaciers retreat by over 150 m in his lifetime, and a Shell employee who lost his home in Hurricane Katrina.

A third element of the film is a series of short, animated sequences explaining various points, such as the resources that go into producing bottled water.

The Age of Stupid went on general release in the UK on 20 March 2009 and received positive reviews in the mainstream press. On 23 March, the Age of Stupid website listed 78 cinemas showing the film during the opening week. These were mostly ‘arthouse’ venues, but included some mainstream cinemas, and the film ran for 5 weeks at the Odeon West End, London. The ‘global premiere’ of *The Age of Stupid* took place on September 21/22, when it was beamed by satellite to 63 countries around the world (AoS, 2010).

The filmmakers have retained control of distribution so that individuals and organisations can hold their own screenings. This enables more widespread showing of the film than would otherwise be the case; as of 13 July 2010, 1452 screenings of the film have been arranged by independent organisers including non-governmental organisations, the National Health Service, and individuals screening to neighbours at home (AoS, 2010).

There are a number of reasons to explore whether *The Age of Stupid* is successful at promoting pro-environmental behaviour. Firstly, although the film makes an emotional appeal, it is essentially another information tool. Secondly, a dominant discourse utilised by the film is the disaster narrative, not only the fictional element but also, for example, through use of footage of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Arguably, it appeals to fear as a motivator. Thirdly, although ‘Not Stupid’ action packs containing a brief list of suggestions under the heading ‘What can I do?’ were given out at many early screenings, the film itself does not directly give information about how viewers can respond to the issues raised. It does mention some possible policy options, such as carbon rationing, and it shows a few mitigation actions such as a couple calculating their carbon footprint and one character growing vegetables, but neither the film nor the action pack provide any information about how to go about lobbying politicians. (In part to address the lack of solutions-based messages, a separate campaign, 10:10, was launched on 1 September 2009 by Franny Armstrong, the director of the film, aiming to encourage individuals and organisations to reduce their carbon footprint by 10% in 2010.¹) These factors raise the question of whether the film promotes or decreases viewers’ sense of agency to act. Thus it provides a case study to explore whether climate change communications utilising vivid images and stories, as advised in much of the literature (e.g. Futerra, 2005; Kearney, 1994; Trumbo and Shanahan, 2000), might be effective, or whether ‘disaster narrative’ framing of the information militates against this.

Additionally, *The Age of Stupid* garnered a lot of media attention ahead of its release, and seemed to have the potential to be influential. It has been mentioned in the UK Parliament, and Franny Armstrong spoke at several events alongside Ed Miliband, then Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (AoS, 2010). It was therefore considered interesting to study the impacts of the film on viewers, and to take the study further than those on *The Day*

¹ See the 10:10 campaign website, available at <http://www.1010uk.org/>.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1054879>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1054879>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)