

Policy briefing

Strong climate legislation and public behaviour change – the role of communication

David Ockwell¹, Saffron O'Neill² and Lorraine Whitmarsh³

Policies to regulate personal, carbon emitting behaviour could not be more at odds: the urgency of climate change requires tough new (*top-down*) behaviour regulation, which must also be publicly acceptable. However, government currently relies on small-scale, (*bottom-up*) voluntary action – with the public majority unable or unwilling to adopt low-carbon lifestyles.

Using psychological insights into how the public understand and act on climate change, combined with insights from policy analysis and interviews with policy makers, we suggest how government could use communication to overcome political climate-apathy. We suggest that communication might engage the public to both adopt lower-carbon lifestyles and – at the same time – accept strong legislation to make these possible.



Key messages

- Meeting UK domestic climate targets will involve dramatic, rapid changes to people's behaviour.
- Government has failed to secure behaviour change because it uses the '*information deficit model*', assuming that information will change attitudes and that behaviour change will follow.
- The government needs *top-down* legislation to regulate peoples' behaviour, but it fears a public backlash and loss of votes.
- Government could also attempt to foster existing *bottom-up* low carbon social movements – but this will not achieve large or fast enough emissions cuts.
- Policy could bridge this *top-down/ bottom-up* dichotomy by using '*psychologically and politically smart communication*' to stimulate public acceptance of the need for climate regulation and provide government the space necessary to introduce behaviour regulating policy.
- This must be pursued in parallel with structural changes to the high-carbon infrastructure and institutions that constrain public adoption of low carbon lifestyles.

¹ Sussex Energy Group (SEG), SPRU – Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Sussex

² The Melbourne School of Land and Environment, University of Melbourne

³ School of Psychology, University of Cardiff



Rapid domestic emission cuts needed

The UK Government's recent Climate Change Act set an ambitious target of an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050. Over a 3rd of UK emissions come from citizens' private travel and household energy use; this sector requires rapid emission cuts.

Government has avoided forcing low-carbon behaviour through legislation (from the 'top-down') – it is not a vote-winner. At present, policy relies on communication that promotes individual, voluntary action (from the 'bottom-up'). However, this approach ignores the many structural and personal barriers to individual behaviour change.

Barriers to behaviour change

Recent communication campaigns such as the Energy Saving Trust's 'Act on CO2' campaign have raised general awareness of climate change. But such communication initiatives mostly aim to change peoples' values to pro-environmental, assuming that behaviour change will follow. In fact, people's values are often at odds with their behaviour. Known as the 'value-action gap' this explains how we can strongly believe that climate action is needed but still, for example, drive or fly. When people are made aware of this, they are more likely to change

their values to justify their behaviour, not vice-versa (known as cognitive dissonance).

What is needed is wider public 'engagement' with climate change. Effective 'engagement' involves more than just awareness and cognition (understanding, knowledge). It has to include affect (emotion, interest and concern) and behaviour (action) – thus behaviour change is unlikely without both cognitive and emotional engagement.

To achieve this engagement, communication initiatives need to overcome a number of barriers at individual and social levels. These include:

Individual barriers:

- *Scepticism, distrust of information or feeling disempowered.*
- *Habits (much energy use is unconscious).*

Social barriers:

- *Perceived lack of political will or action from industry and others in society (other people or countries e.g. China).*
- *The role of social norms – e.g. driving fast cars is fashionable.*
- *Individuals locate responsibility for causing climate change with others and perceive widespread inaction to address it – eroding motivation to change one's lifestyle.*

Over a 3rd of UK emissions come from citizens' private travel and household energy use.



Climate change is also plagued by the “collective action” problem – individuals incur costs in changing their behaviour, but the benefits of these changes are spread throughout society. There is little incentive for individuals to act unless they know that others are also acting.

These barriers undermine reliance on individual voluntary action. This implies a need for government to intervene and decarbonise behaviours from the top-down.

Top-down regulation

Government could introduce strong legislation to reduce carbon emissions, such as personal carbon quotas, congestion charges, fuel taxes and emission-based parking charges. There are limits to the extent that behaviour can be regulated – e.g. people cannot be forced to turn down their thermostats or drive less. But policies such as personal carbon quotas, if politically acceptable, could overcome such limits.

Removing individual agency would overcome intractable environmental attitudes e.g. belief that governments only serve the interests of big business. It also overcomes collective action problems – people might be happier to take action if they know everyone has to act on climate change. It might also deliver emissions cuts within the time the science suggests is necessary.



Fearing public backlashes like the fuel protests of 2000 and being branded as a ‘nanny state’, government prefers to influence or ‘nudge’ behaviour – without compromising consumer sovereignty or economic growth. But potentially unpopular policy can turn good: the London Congestion Charge eventually met with public support; smoking has been banned in work and public places – something that until recently would have meant electoral defeat. These have taken decades to become politically viable – a luxury not available with climate change. The political goal is to shift climate change from ‘bad’ to good ‘politics’ by understanding how public opinion can be changed.

Bottom-up engagement

There are between 2,000 and 4,000 community-based grassroots groups working on climate change in the UK, helping individuals reduce their carbon emissions. Examples include Carbon Reduction Action Groups (a network of citizens who support each other to reduce their carbon footprints) and Global Action Plan (an initiative to encourage sustainable communities and workplaces) and various car pool clubs.

Whilst the value of these initiatives is high, they are limited in scale and arguably dwarfed by the scale and urgency climate change poses.

Government should direct communication from behaviour change campaigns towards encouraging people to accept the need for legislation.

Bridging the gap: fostering acceptance of regulation

Both forcing people to be green or relying on voluntary grassroots action have serious limitations. Communication efforts could, however, be reoriented to bridge this bottom-up, top-down gap. Instead of seeking just to change people's understanding and values, it could seek to foster social demand for, and acceptance of regulation. The aim would be to create political capital by shifting views of climate change from 'bad' to 'good' politics and provide government the space to introduce behaviour regulating policy without backlashes such as the 2000 fuel protests. But achieving this will require 'smart communication'.

'Smart communication'

Policy needs '*psychologically and politically smart communication*' to overcome public barriers to engagement. Communication must be '*politically smart*', building on analysis of how social demand for regulation has been generated in the past (e.g. the 2001 Jubilee '*Drop the Debt*' campaign which encouraged the public to lobby for developed countries to cancel third world debt; Friends of the Earth's '*Big Ask*' campaign saw nearly 200,000 people contact their MP calling for a strong climate law.). It must analyse what influences politicians' sense of the public mood so that politicians know when to regulate (e.g. why was the smoking ban deemed acceptable?).

'*Psychologically smart communication*' involves state-of-the-art, marketing and public engagement research aiming to:

- *Overcome individual and social barriers (listed above).*
- *Segment and appeal to specific audiences.*

- *Target information to particular audience needs and motivations.*
- *Tie communication to personal concerns.*
- *Address cultural values or social norms, e.g. driving even when walking or cycling is feasible.*
- *Emphasise benefits to reducing emissions, such as saving money, improved air quality, quieter streets and personal fitness.*
- *People are more able to change behaviour when they can break their habits – when events change, such as changing job or moving house.*

Structural barriers

In parallel with pursuing the communication based initiatives recommended here, behaviour change also requires government to work to remove the structural and institutional barriers that constrain low carbon behaviour. For example:

- *We live and work within a high-carbon infrastructure; housing stock (old and new) is often energy inefficient.*
- *Alternatives to driving are often more expensive, less reliable and less safe.*
- *Low-carbon home energy (e.g. solar hot water systems), will not be widely adopted with such high upfront costs and long payback periods and if viable to homeowners only.*
- *The laws that govern our roads are designed with cars, not cycles in mind.*

Effective, smart communication and the resulting public engagement will make climate change 'good' politics. It will encourage the voluntary adoption of low carbon behaviour and, at the same time, create the political capital policy makers need to introduce strong behaviour regulating legislation.

Contacts

Dr David Ockwell

T +44 (0)1273 873541

E D.G.Ockwell@sussex.ac.uk

Dr Saffron O'Neill

sjoneill@unimelb.edu.au

Dr Lorraine Whitmarsh

WhitmarshLE@cardiff.ac.uk

Communication initiatives have not addressed complex barriers to public engagement with climate change.

US

University of Sussex

SPRU – Science & Technology Policy Research

Printed on paper from sustainable forests using elemental chlorine-free pulp

E · S · R · C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL