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Belief in change: the role of media and communications in driving action on climate change

Abstract: Climate change is a collective action problem as much as it is a physical one, however, in spite of high levels of awareness and a broad acceptance of the science, there has been no public consensus on the need to prioritise action. This chapter explores the role of current communications processes in inhibiting the development of such public sentiment. It draws on a circuits of communications framework which addresses production processes, and the structures which underpin them, patterns in media content and how audiences receive media messages, including online interactions. It will argue that these have operated to shift political priorities and foster feelings of powerlessness whilst in fact collectively publics can play a crucial role in shifting the parameters of the debate.

Keywords: climate change, media, communications, digital media, collective action

Introduction

Climate change is a collective action problem as much as a physical one and, as such, a necessary precondition for tackling it is some level of public consensus on the urgency of doing so. Despite a general level of concern and awareness however there has been no sustained and effective public demand for governments to act. That the media do not simply reflect what is going on in society is widely recognised by media researchers; however the degree to which media representations may be implicating in driving social action is much disputed (Curran 2002; Castells 2010; Happer and Philo 2013, Philo et al. 2015). On an issue such as climate change, which is rooted in a complex science that most people do not easily understand or have direct experience of, the media play a key role in communicating and interpreting the causes, threats and potential solutions (Boykoff and Yulsman 2013). These interpretations are founded on broader assumptions about societal priorities and the most effective ways to bring about social change which are in circulation at any time. This chapter begins with a discussion of the communications processes across the social, political and corporate spheres that shape the range of perspectives that get heard. Drawing on a series of recent British empirical studies, it then explores the way in which these perspectives are accepted or challenged – and argues that these responses have decisive implications for promoting (or inhibiting) the action that is becoming increasingly urgent on climate change.

Neoliberalism and the 'climate mismatch'

Naomi Klein has talked of 'our climate change mismatch' – that the collective action required to mitigate against climate change is out of step with the economic and cultural priorities of the era. The context for this is the movement of Western societies towards a model of 'neoliberalism' over the last three decades. A term much in dispute (Venugopal 2015), it variously refers to an ideology, a system or set of policies in practice and/or a period such an era of capitalism (Fine, 2013; Davidson 2015). These elements are dynamic and inconsistent (Fine 2013). Central to this inconsistency is that, while theoretically neoliberalism involves the promotion of 'free markets', in practice it has led to the increased state intervention in the marketplace to redirect power to large global corporations (Miller 2010; Miller 2015; Philo et al. 2015). Previously publicly owned institutions are increasingly transferred to the private sector and the greatly expanded financial markets, and the profit imperative progressively eats into almost every area of social life (Fine and Hall 2012). Corporations feed into decisions which affect the public directly and, as a result, collective solutions to public issues

are marginalised in favour of corporate solutions (Dinan and Miller 2007; Miller and Dinan 2015). The public are increasingly reconfigured as consumers in their engagement with issues such as education, health and the environment (Devereux 2014)

This structural shift in power relations must also be understood in the context of a shift in the 'communicative processes' which support these changes. To understand this better it is useful to draw on a 'circuits of communication' framework which theorises social change as a product of the interactive elements and processes which construct the range of perspectives, and related actions, which might be considered (Miller and Dinan 2015; Philo et al. 2015). These elements include; the suppliers of information such as elite speakers and politicians, and the groups who have access to them including corporate actors and advocacy groups; the nature and volume of media content; how audiences respond to media content; and any decisive outcomes such as policy-making and other forms of collective action. Crucially all of these elements interact and they are not mutually exclusive so, for example, politicians supply information to the mainstream media but they also take into account their beliefs about how audiences respond to decisions that they make. After all, politicians are ultimately answerable to electoral support. Within the circuits model, digital media play a dual and often oppositional role; in that they construct 'audiences simultaneously as media consumers and media producers, allowing for a more interactive level of response whilst also supporting a parallel flow of information that interacts with mainstream media' (Philo et al 2015: 446). Audiences can publicly scrutinise and challenge the messages of mainstream media by drawing on their 'collective intelligence' through, for example, the use of social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, and this can be seen as an alternative form of media power (Jenkins 2006).   However, this is accompanied by 'media convergence', a key aspect of which is the consolidation of media ownership across platforms that tends to reinforce the increasingly narrow range of perspectives that audiences have to choose from. Miller and Dinan (2015) have charted the increased opportunities for corporate PR and lobby groups under neoliberalism to dominate these increasingly integrated 'communicative processes' as they move deeper and deeper into social and political institutions. In one sense, their activities are not transparent to the public as they deal directly with decision-makers – what Miller calls the 'short circuit' – but corporate PR agencies also have a public platform in that they feed directly into both traditional (and therefore digital) media content in systematic and unprecedented ways.

The degree to which action on climate change will be prioritised therefore can be seen as the product of a constant and evolving struggle between different forces. The impact of the financial crash in 2008 is instructive in this respect. The period preceding the crash was a progressive time for public debate on climate change.   Al Gore's documentary An Inconvenient Truth, was released in 2006 just one year before the landmark Fourth Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of 2007 opening up voluminous and broadly positive media and political attention across the Western world (Philo and Happer 2013). The then New Labour government in the UK, whilst rooted in free market ideology, strongly promoted its socially democratic principles of which climate change action was a key aspect. Significantly this was largely supported by a Conservative opposition out of office for nearly a decade and keen to modernise under new leader David Cameron. This period culminated in the passing of the ambitious UK Climate Change Act in 2008.

If some predicted that the financial crash of the same year would bring about the end of neoliberalism, the evidence suggests it cemented structural and ideological processes integral to it further (Berry 2015; Philo et al. 2015). In spite of intense public anger at the actions of

those in the finance industry, the political and media debate demonstrated a systematic absence of any effective challenge to the prevailing economic system (Berry 2012, 2015; Philo 2012; Happer and Philo 2013). Collective solutions such as state intervention in the banks were marginalised, and austerity was presented as as 'common sense as a well-managed household avoiding the accumulation of unnecessary unsecured debt' (Stanley 2014: 905). The broad political consensus on the need to reduce the deficit via spending cuts ushered in a coalition government led by the Conservatives which, from the point of taking office, consistently stated that the urgent priority was tackling the debt while promoting economic recovery. As to the question of the positioning of environmental action and carbon reduction strategies in relation to this top priority, at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2011, one year into office, Chancellor Osborne stated that 'We're not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business.'

Returning to the 'short-circuit' of communications, there is some indication that this shift in rhetoric has been paralleled by a growth in the efforts of contrarian think tanks since 2006 which aim to 'dominate the information environment in a number of distinct private and public arenas' (Miller and Dinan 2015: 98). In 2013, the Guardian revealed that secretive trusts linked to wealthy US and UK corporations funded large numbers of organisations which either operated to systematically discredit climate science or downplay the need to take action (Goldenberg, 2013; Miller and Dinan 2015). A key dimension of the strategy is of elite planning groups and think tanks inputting directly into governmental decision-making. In 2012, evidence shows that the Chancellor met with representatives from Centrica, Exxon and other oil and gas industry groups for undisclosed 'general discussions' at least once a month (Hickman 2012). This compared with not a single meeting with personnel from the green energy industry in the same period. Meanwhile, in spite of climate and energy policy objectives remaining formally in place, the promotion of, for example, the further use of fossil fuels through 'fracking' and other market based 'solutions' indicated a general watering down of the Climate Change Act's targets. In spite of claims in 2006 by David Cameron to form the 'greenest government ever, by 2015, at the launch of the Conservative party's manifesto, climate change wasn't mentioned once.

Mainstream and digital media debates

The political debate directly impacts upon mainstream media coverage as there is a continuing reliance upon a restricted range of elite sources of which politicians are the most significant due to their authority status and direct access to policy making (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013; Lupien 2013). However the media do not simply reflect the movements and interests of political parties – the shape that content takes is the product of a range of competing interests. Journalists are subject to a range of pressures including ownership, editorial and financial interests but ultimately the need to deliver audiences (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Philo et al. 2015). However, a further factor is the norms and ethics of journalism, such as adherence to balance and neutrality, and the need to challenge decision-making (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004, 2007; Guerrera 2009; Tambini 2010). Even journalists operating in the most constrained organisational structures need to feature a wider range of views. Audiences expect the political decision-making process to be scrutinised, and the media respond to this. However a central criticism of the reporting of climate change in the English-speaking media has been the way in which these norms, primarily the aim of 'balanced' reporting, have given disproportionate space to climate sceptics (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004, 2007; Painter 2011). Some of these are part of the powerful and well-resourced groups operating to undermine the science and de-prioritise it as part of the wider climate contrarian movement. A UK-based group, The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), for example, has regular representatives on

the BBC (Monbiot, 2013), including appearances on the corporation's flagship current affairs programme, Question Time. The claims of the contrarians do not go unchallenged; there are a range of speakers including representatives of advocacy groups as well as those from the mainstream of the political spectrum. But these sceptical views do not struggle to get heard.

In the context of growing certainty about the science but reduced political priority, there has been recent concerted efforts by the scientific community to shape reporting of the science. When the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released its fifth Assessment Report (AR5) in 2013/14, the largest and most detailed summary of the science to date, it had a very clear communications strategy. These comments by one of the report's lead authors prior to the launch illuminate the approach:

> Climate change is really a challenge in managing risks. And it's not that we're talking about identifying particular things that're going to happen in a particular place, at a particular time. (Painter, 2014)

Research on the TV coverage (Painter 2014) showed that the IPCC was successful in having genuine scientists lead the debate; IPCC authors and other scientists were almost exclusively the interviewees who appeared on screen during coverage of the report. However, they were less successful in reframing the debate; instead of the language of risk, uncertainty and opportunity, the disaster frame dominated reporting (Painter 2014). A critical point is the degree to which contrarian speakers can effectively challenge the disaster narrative. The disproportionate air-time given to Professor of Economics, Richard Tol - one of many hundreds of IPCC contributors - who announced he wanted his name removed from the report stating he was unhappy with the final draft's tendency to be "alarmist' suggests that it allows for the conventional 'balanced' approach (Happer 2014) – which perhaps the IPCC's preferred framing of risk does not quite so easily. The disaster frame (and response) also meets with broadcasters' ultimate objectives of engaging with audiences providing a sense of conflict and drama to an otherwise quite dry scientific report.

Digital media potentially offers collective ways of challenging mainstream messages. New media scholars argue that the emergence of digital news, and the increasing use of social media, has led to a shift in the relationship between mainstream journalism and audiences which ultimately poses a threat to the 'authority' of the former (Robinson 2010; Rosen 2012; Siapera 2011). An element of this is the way in which audience response via blogs, social media or online comments can 'fact-check' the perspectives promoted in the mainstream (Jenkins 2006; Robinson 2010; Marchionni, 2013). Misleading information can be discredited at a much faster pace by activists and experts (professional or otherwise) operating online drawing on their 'collective intelligence' (Jenkins 2006). As illustration, in 2013, an interview on the Sunday Politics with then Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, was met with immediate and voluminous accusations on Twitter over a number of factual inaccuracies on climate science. The programme's presenter, Andrew Neill, defended himself against what he described as the 'climate mafia', a term which indicates at least some shift in media power. However, the degree to which there has been a genuine challenge to the power of mainstream media, and the power relations which lie behind them, is as yet unproven. A key aspect of media power, which the example shows, is the ability to focus attention upon particular areas – on Twitter, in line with the TV broadcast, the focus was the dispute between different factions over climate science, and away from the more important issues of the action that urgently needs to be taken. If the battleground is the ability to shape public debate, this represents a wider trend demonstrated by research that Twitter follows the mainstream media agenda rather than the other way

around (Newman 2011). In fact an equal if not greater problem than the conflicted nature of reporting in recent years has been the inconsistent level of global coverage (Fischer, 2011; 2015). Since 2009, when climate change coverage reached a peak with the UN climate change summit in Copenhagen, volume of coverage suffered a sharp decline reflecting a re-ordering of the political and social priorities in response to the economic crash (and to some degree the range of forces which have operated to de-prioritise the need for action). Levels of reporting made some recovery in 2014, though TV coverage of that year's IPCC report was again lower than that of previous reports (Painter 2014). So whilst the Twitter battle rages on amongst interested groups online, climate change often receives very little mainstream attention at all.

Audience reception and the commitment to climate change action

That challenges to mainstream media messages do not routinely penetrate the mainstream political and media agenda however that is not to suggest that audiences unthinkingly accept the messages that they are receiving. Indeed the Twitter battle demonstrates that many reject them. Within the circuits model, the way in which audiences negotiate content, including acceptance and rejection of the message, is dependent upon a range of different factors. Prior beliefs, values and the range of alternative experiences and knowledge which audiences have to draw all play a role in the way in which audiences evaluate media messages (Philo and Berry 2004, 2011; Briant et al. 2011; Happer et al. 2012; Philo and Happer 2013). Returning to the question of their dual role, digital media do not simply provide a platform to interactively respond to the mainstream, they also support a parallel flow of information, which can be consumed in a fairly traditional manner, and which can potentially reinforce the latter. In this section, I will examine the way in which audiences negotiate the range of information that they receive on climate change across the range of media that they access. This will include consideration of how information is assessed in terms of trust and credibility and how it interacts with other beliefs and values to shape attitudes, perceptions and ultimately commitments to action on climate change. In doing so, I will focus on a range of research studies conducted by the Glasgow University Media Group between 2011-2015 (Happer et al. 2012; Philo and Happer 2013; Happer and Philo 2013; Happer and Philo, 2015) which involved focus groups with audience members from across the UK. This work is contextualised within the substantial body of work looking at public attitudes towards and engagement with climate change in the UK and US (Upham et al., 2009; Pidgeon, 2010; Whitmarsh et al 2013) which have explored the various factors for shifts and variations such as the influence of weather, socio-economic and political factors and media attention (Nisbet and Myers, 2007; Pidgeon, 2010; Kahn and Kotchen, 2010;Whitmarsh et al. 2013). Whilst I do not offer a review of this substantial and important body of work, it is worth highlighting a general trend in findings since 2007 – which is the reduction in concern and the growth of scepticism in the English-speaking world (Pidgeon, 2010; Capstick et al 2014). This is the starting point.

Awareness, understanding and belief in relation to climate science

Awareness of climate change is high in the UK; everyone has heard about it. Across the range of GUMG studies, there is some indication that levels of confusion have reduced in recent years; in spite of continuing associations with the ozone layer made by a minority, for example, in our most recent study, most respondents immediately brought to mind key terms such as global warming and greenhouse gases. Respondents tend to agree that human activity contributes to climate change – and those who reject the science outright are in a small minority. Indeed in our most recent study, there was evidence that the sceptical

position is very much marginalised. However, across the research, it has become clear that scepticism is a difficult thing to measure. It is perhaps best understood as a spectrum of different beliefs, from those who claim climate change isn't happening, to those who believe it is happening but is the result of natural processes, to those who believe human behaviour is playing only a limited role.   Even amongst those who state a strong belief in man-made climate change, there is a general tendency to question the robustness of the data and/or the limitations upon scientific knowledge, as this conversation shows:

> *Female respondent: I think especially some of the things that I've read about denying climate change – you can understand where they are getting that kind of understanding from – like, I can see how they can deny that it is happening.*

> *Facilitator: Because the evidence isn't strong enough or as obvious as you'd like?*

> *Female respondent: Yeah, because the evidence is kind of like on both sides, climate change in many ways, it's a theoretical thing, and as much is there is proof – it's proof if you want to see it.* (Glasgow, low income group, 2012)

A further consistent trend, irrespective of levels of belief and awareness, is the lack of priority given to climate change.   It is felt to be important, and there is a broad consensus that action will have to be taken at some point, but beyond doing their bit by recycling (which crucially is structurally supported and publicly encouraged), most don't feel that strongly. It is secondary to other issues. Our research confirmed some of the wider findings in relation to perceptions of remoteness, temporally and geographically, and being overwhelmed by the enormity of global climate change, but it also provided insight into the role of the media, and wider communicative processes, in shaping this general disengagement with the issue.

Negotiating multi-media content on climate change

In 2006, Henry Jenkins talked of the 'migratory behaviour' of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of content they want in a re-structuring of the hierarchy between audiences and content in which the latter take the lead (Jenkins 2006). Certainly our research shows that the more traditional news consumers, those who, for example, routinely consume television news in real-time, are outnumbered by audiences who engage in a dynamic process of multi-media content negotiation. However, a critical aspect of this process is that mainstream media triggers this process – interest is piqued by news outlets, such as the BBC or the Daily Mail online, via mobile alerts or social media posts. Where the audience 'migrates' to, and the scanning of a range of headlines and the interactive discussions which they engage in, tend to follow the mainstream agenda. This is, in part, simply because online interaction needs stimuli and a collective focus.   But a further reason for scanning the range of media on any issue is the very low levels of trust in the media and mainstream journalism. Our respondents demonstrated a high sensitivity to the ideological bias of different outlets, and therefore the aim was to compare and contrast the range of reporting to find consistency, and assess the accuracy of the basic facts and arguments.

Climate change however is subject to peaks and troughs in media attention, and the issue is not top of the mainstream agenda. The majority are currently not scanning the media for more information, or taking part in social media discussion on the subject.   As such, interpretations and understandings were drawn from the range of sources that were not actively sought on the subject; mainstream news broadcasts, TV documentaries (for example, Discovery) the BBC. Most had 'pieced together' an understanding across a period rather than actively engaging with the issue.   As a complex scientific issue that most people have

no direct knowledge of, respondents conceded they were particularly reliant upon the media to make sense of it – but it was widely felt that information which was accurate and trustworthy was very difficult to find (though most hadn't looked). There was widespread awareness of the battling factions involved in the debate, and in particular of the concerted efforts of sceptical groups to penetrate the mainstream. But even this awareness did not deter such reports from constructing a perception of conflict. Our findings indicated that there was a connection between the reinforcement of scepticism and the tendency to see the scientific arguments as lacking rigour, and/or the scientists as not wholly consistent. Scientists were largely trusted, and this was not a rejection of the arguments, rather it fuelled a nagging doubt in the back of people's minds about whether to take action – the 'but what if they're wrong…?' position. Our research further suggests that these minor doubts on the legitimacy of the science, and the related question of the pressing need to take action, persisted in part because they were reinforced by first, perceptions of the democratic process, and the relative powerless of individuals within it, and second, the dominant perspectives on current social and political priorities and how to achieve them.

Perceptions of powerlessness and lack of trust

A key theme in relation to disengagement which emerged across all studies was perceptions of powerlessness and a sense of cynicism about the democratic process which ultimately will dictate whether action on climate change will be pursued. This sense of powerlessness was rooted in a number of factors. The first of these was the widespread distrust of public figures, primarily politicians, who it was felt would not act in the public interest – some cited the expenses scandal and the Leveson inquiry in support of these perceptions. Most also agreed that what politicians promised and what they actually did were often in conflict;

> *Male respondent: Yeah, 'cause we hear a lot of stories now where they way one thing and they go back on it… then they give you excuses why… so you think are they really going to follow through?* (Manchester, student group, 2015)

Respondents referred to cases of collective action which had been simply ignored such as the Iraq war marches – and the background to this, of course, is a Conservative party which campaigned in 2010 on promises about 'the greenest government ever' and, in office, argued to dilute the carbon reduction targets.

These perceptions led to a general feeling that the democratic process currently does not work to represent the will of the people. Whilst people do not have in-depth knowledge of the 'short-circuit' of negotiations that take place, many have a general sense of a corrupted political process in which vested interests take priority over the public good. Respondents felt that they had no power over the decisions that are made. This perception appeared to be particularly strong in younger people – parliamentary politics felt very distant from their lives. It is easy to argue that politicians themselves are responsible for such negative perceptions however the role of the media is not negligible here. The mainstream media is responsive to the public sentiment (the feeling that politicians are not to be trusted) but the wider demonization of politicians as a collective (what the Daily Mail calls 'our sneering political elite'[1]) and the often sensationalist personal attacks on politicians exploit and exaggerate such sentiment. In the end, it is the voters alienated from politics who lose – as their interests are least likely to be represented in the democratic process. In the 2015

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[1] From the column by Dominic Sandbrook, 'Our sneering political elite and a howl of rage that could change politics forever', Daily Mail, 11th October 2014.

election, for example, there was strong evidence that the policy commitments of the Conservative party most benefitted the older groups who are most likely to vote with the younger generations, who tend not to, benefitting least.

The argument that access to digital media promotes increased participation in the democratic process, for example, via public debate and/or information provision, was not supported by our findings. In some ways, these perceptions of powerlessness and lack of trust were further exacerbated by the nature of the information environment that audiences are confronted with. There is no question that access to the greater range of media messages, and the means to interact with them, is largely perceived to be a positive development. But across all samples, respondents noted that they found the attributing of trust in this information environment a challenge and there was evidence that the overwhelming range of information to negotiate could lead to further disengagement. As this comment illustrates:

> *Female respondent: I think it's because we're exposed to so many opinions from people and, you know, a lot of the time it is conflicting opinions, you don't know who to believe, so it's a case of believing nothing instead of believing anything.* (Glasgow, middle income group, 2014)

A further dimension to this was the sense that the information environment is so vast, it is very difficult to penetrate. There is so much information, no one can get heard. Whilst digital media, in theory, offers the *potential* to penetrate the public debate and shape decision-making, most respondents felt that currently they had no public voice on important issues. The evidence suggests that the shift of media power towards the masses is largely illusory at this point. In the context of limited public debate on and priority given to climate change, the lack of public trust in politicians, and wider cynicism about the democratic process, including the limited power to shift the terms of the debate, discouraged respondents from investing in the issue themselves.

Shifting priorities – back to the 'climate mismatch'

The focusing of attention on other issues, such as the economy, and the marginalisation (or demonization) of collective solutions to social problems also play a role in fuelling disengagement. As the work of Mike Berry (2012; 2015) has shown, in reflection of shifting political priorities since the recession of 2008, reducing the deficit via a programme of austerity has dominated reporting whilst other solutions have been marginalised (Happer and Philo 2013; Happer 2013; Berry 2015). In our research conducted early into the Coalition government's leadership, respondents tended to echo the arguments of Osborne, largely mirrored in the wider media, that tackling climate change was not compatible with the priority of fixing the finances, as this respondent from the 2012 sample noted: *I don't think that the government should be spending a lot of money on this at this time….there are much more important things.* Concerns with the economy were raised in all groups, and returning to the question of persisting doubt, this female respondent noted that it was not a time for risk-taking

> *Female respondent: Pay off the debt first before we pay off stuff that we don't know is making a difference. Realistically we don't know if it's making a difference.* (Norfolk, middle income group, 2012)

In the wider sense of governments prioritising climate change policies, some went further to suggest it would be irresponsible to devote funds to climate change at the current time. In the 2015 research, there was more awareness of the fact that the focus on climate change, and

the potential solutions involved, were largely at odds with not only public priorities but also perceptions of the most effective measures to bring about social change. This respondent, for example, acknowledged that his own reluctance to accept climate change science was rooted in an ideological rejection of the kinds of solutions which would have to be taken:

> *Male respondent: There's quite a big green lobby that would quite like to see certain industries, oh, I don't know, taken down or taxed heavily in favour of other industries because they think that's the answer to everything but I happen to disagree with that [] I feel it's a bit anti-progress.* (London, middle income group, 2015)

Others noted that society had become too 'selfish' and people too focused on their own lives (and whether they could afford the new Iphone) – but this reconfiguring of the public as primarily consumers was ultimately, if regretfully, accepted as simply the way things are. In this sense, those who feel it is foolish to prioritise climate change at this time and those who regret that it's inevitable that we won't demonstrate the power of media to marginalise the possibility of action.

Public demand for climate change action

The crucial point however is that it is not inevitable either that climate change won't be tackled successfully by national or international governments or that the current economic approach is fixed, and alternatives are not possible. The periodic shifts in attention to and action on climate change, and indeed the passing of the ambitious 2008 UK Change Act, discussed earlier in this chapter are evidence that ideas, and the social structures which underpin them, can change fairly quickly. The response to the financial crash of 2008 in terms of austerity under a new Coalition government is further evidence. The very real consequences for the public challenged existing belief systems and the political actors and media played a role in building a consensus on the correct course of action. Within the circuits model, political and media priorities evolve, and public experience and response play a role in that process; they are inter-connected. While political parties are not perfectly responsive to public sentiment; it is an important consideration. The media is a site of competing interests; it shapes the public agenda in response to the range of interest groups which feed into production, but it must also connect with what the public think and believe too. Ultimately media products need an audience. If content on climate change connected with a larger audience, levels of reporting would grow. This would stimulate online debate and potentially facilitate the mobilisation of collectives in relation to civil action which ultimately politicians would respond to. Crucially climate change needs to get on the electoral agenda. If, in the current climate, it is difficult to imagine what might stimulate such a shift, our research may offer some insights. As part of our series of studies, we also assessed the response to new information on climate change; we found that framings which connected with existing concerns and/or brought home the very real and direct consequences of climate change made a significant impact. For example, a constructed TV news report showing the potential impact on the number of climate refugees coming to the UK provoked a greater level of concern and urgency tapping into common fears about increased levels of immigration and the associated problems. The current situation in Syria is perceived as a crisis to which the UK must respond; and the connections with climate change are beginning to be made (O'Hagan 2015). Such circumstances can often act as the catalyst for demands for action, which politicians find impossible to ignore.

Conclusion

I have argued that the circuit of communication is currently operating in the direction of inhibiting action on climate change. Large corporations, such as the oil and gas industry, have direct access to decision-makers, and have also been effective in penetrating the media with sceptical viewpoints – though these do not go unchallenged. The shift in political priorities since the financial collapse has seen spending cuts prioritised over public action on a range of social issues of which climate change is one, albeit arguably the most important one. This has further led to inconsistent coverage in the media (which follows the politicians). The way in which audiences respond to political and media messages is complex but currently there is evidence that the range of content available has promoted disengagement with the issue. In spite of the small group of enthusiasts online, digital media has not shifted the mainstream agenda, and has operated to reinforce this response. This disengagement results partly from the belief that the issue won't be prioritised, and also because focusing on the economy seems like the common sense thing to do. However, the media is also a site of competing interests, and it is here that the potential for change may lie. Hope may, for example, lie in recent collective action such as the divestment movement which has emerged across university campuses worldwide and which has had some success but unlimited potential. Such movements are crucial in shifting the perception that collectives can drive change – currently a central obstacle to the drive to action that is becoming so urgent on climate change.

Acknowledgements

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