

# **An Assessment of Climate Change Imagery in the UK's Media**

Written by Timothy Salinger

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TIMOTHY SALINGER, MAR 5 2016

### **To What Extent is Public Disengagement with Climate Change in the UK to be Expected?**

In the context of almost universal scientific agreement on the existence of climate change, a steady increase in public disengagement towards climate change has been noted: in 2005, 91% of people surveyed believed the world's climate was changing, however in 2010 this figure was only 78% (Spence et al., 2010), leading us to question why we are less inclined to engage with climate change than before? Indeed, it is not enough for people to know about climate change in order to be engaged; they also need to care about it, be motivated and able to take action (Lorenzoni et al., 2007: 446). Here we define engagement as comprising of three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects (Lorenzoni et al., 2007: 446), all of which are imperative in relating increasing levels of disengagement to the public sphere. This piece will focus on the importance of visual imagery in promoting climate change and seek to examine why specific types of visual imagery may be fostering disengagement, and suggest new methods of promoting active engagement with climate change in communication efforts. Indeed, mass media communication is hypothesised to play a key role in the public understanding of risk (Wahlberg and Sjoberg, 2000) with the visual in particular having the ability to arouse emotion, making it an effective medium for the social construction of risk messages (Joffe, 2008). Audiences of media information are active processors rather than 'passive receptacles' who socially construct their understanding of risk information (Boholm, 1998), implying that the current methods of visualising climate change may not be fostering engagement.

Many studies have analysed the effects of certain types of visual imagery in news media and it is noted that whilst a diversity of climate change imagery exists, particular types seem to have gained dominance, which promote specific ways of knowing about climate change whilst marginalising others (O'Neill and Smith, 2014). Research has sought to outline some of the more general hurdles to engagement with climate change, notably concerning social, institutional and individual barriers (see Ockwell, 2009; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Blake 1999), but visual imagery alone has its limitations.

In their most practical sense, imagery may be divided into three distinct categories: iconic visuals, symbolic visuals and spectacular visuals (O'Neill and Smith, 2014: 77), all of which have the power to affect engagement in one way or another. Perhaps the most important of these, in relation to disengagement, are spectacular visuals. They are increasingly effective in promoting salience and strong emotion towards climate change, with 'before and after' photographs giving viewers baselines upon which to perform their representations (Smith and Joffe, 2009: 652). The most obvious example of this in recent times is the case of the much maligned polar bear, depicted in several images perched on a solitary lump of ice, or malnourished as a result of retreating ice caps, it has now become commonplace spectacular visual imagery. Whilst being strongly affective, these images have been widely attributed to promoting disengagement, as although they are undoubtedly salient, they do little to promote feelings of self-efficacy and often leave viewers feeling overwhelmed or helpless (Hespanha, 2011; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009). Visual representations are essential in how people construct meanings about climate change, and this 'distanced' framework (O'Neill and Smith, 2014) blocks the general public from relating climate change closer to home. Images of climate mitigation and adaptation are rarely reported (O'Neill and Smith, 2014), but would seem to be more effective in promoting engagement with climate change at an individual level. Further, although encouraging

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a sense of shock at witnessing climate impacts, spectacular images also render climate change as a past event, rather than an issue for the present or future (Doyle, 2009): those reading an article on retreating ice caps may not know or understand that the melting of sea ice is a yearly occurrence, for example. Indeed, the featured image of a polar bear certainly portrays its plight as irreversible, and only serves to further the view that climate change is 'removed in space and time' (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon, 2006) and does not pose an imminent personal threat, furthering disengagement.

However, where spectacular imagery fails in promoting self-efficacy, iconic and symbolic visuals have been found to fail in promoting salience. Imagery of politicians and prominent figures has dominated coverage in certain aspects of climate change (DiFrancesco and Young, 2010; and O'Neill, 2013), above all in tabloid newspapers (Smith and Joffe, 2009). This politicisation of climate change may be a key contributing factor in public disengagement, as more than half the British general public claim to not know very much or nothing about politics, with only 12% of the population 'politically active' (Hansard, 2008). Therefore, the appearance of political figures is unlikely to either achieve high salience or promote self-efficacy in the public, and in this sense public disengagement must be expected. Linked to this 'politicisation' comes the issue of uncertainty. Opposing arguments of prominent politicians and exacerbated media coverage of disagreement (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005) may drown out the widespread scientific agreement on anthropogenic climate change, leading to confusion. There is still widespread association of the hole in the ozone layer with climate change (Hargreaves et al., 2003; Poortinga et al., 2006; DEFRA, 2002), and the public response to such uncertainty, as Lorenzoni notes, is scepticism (2007: 452).

Some simple conclusions may be drawn from these findings. Firstly, that images of climate impacts promote salience but undermine self-efficacy; and secondly that images of prominent figures undermine feelings of saliency, giving credence to Ockwell's argument that existing communication approaches often inform but fail to engage (Ockwell et al., 2009: 321). Given these arguments, disengagement with climate change does not seem so surprising.

How then, if at all, may visual imagery be used to the advantage of public engagement? In contrast to spectacular images of polar bears, perhaps a focus on imagery 'closer to home' in communication campaigns, featuring actions of climate mitigation or adaptation, would be more efficacious. Indeed it has been found that pictures featuring the installation of solar panels and other adaptation activities provoked starkly more positive reactions than that of spectacular images (Hespanha, 2011; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009) in promoting self-efficacy. The use of visual imagery has often relied on the psychological 'information deficit model', assuming that the public are 'empty vessels' ready to take on any new information (Irwin and Wynne, 1996), however in the modern era this view is too simplistic. As Ockwell et al. argue, an approach based on a better understanding of how to engage people at an affective and emotional level may be more effective through the use of bottom-up, non-expert climate perceptions rather than top-down expertise (2009: 321). Whilst such imagery may appear more banal than spectacular images, they have been proven to promote positive reaction, and it is this self-efficacy that will foster changes in attitudes and engagement. A prime example of this would be that of flooding imagery. Smith and Joffe find that imagery of flooding in the UK has strongly affected salience (2009; also O'Neill et al., 2012), and the appearance of familiar landscapes and people in these images bring the imminence and importance of climate change closer to home, making evident that it is not a faraway issue. Whilst drastic and spectacular images of flooding may undermine self-efficacy (O'Neill et al., 2012), highlighting the links between such local weather events and climate change increases willingness to act (Spence et al., 2011). It will certainly be interesting to note how the current flooding in the UK (2015), a repetition of previous years, will emphasise this as a growing and immediate issue.

Further, there may in fact be some practicality in relating spectacular and salient images to local situations. Images evoking future local possibilities and landscapes have been found to promote self-efficacy (Hespanha, 2011), and indeed more recently the use of 3D landscape visualisations and modern technology has allowed for realistic visual depiction of climate change futures (Bishop and Lange, 2005), permitting the public to identify climate change in the 'dominant form' to which the human species is genetically adapted (visual landscapes) (Sheppard, 2005: 638). This would ideally combine with the previously mentioned idea of 'before and after' landscapes, with the key focus being on what is imminent and closer to home, in the hope that this may intertwine both salience and self-efficacy successfully. The use of these future landscapes may be imperative in forging the link between iconic, symbolic and spectacular imagery and promoting both affective response and self-efficacy jointly, and this piece has demonstrated

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that such a link may play a large part in promoting public engagement.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, here we have examined some of the literature and reasoning seeking to examine the reasons for a steady trend in public disengagement with climate change in the United Kingdom. Visual imagery in communication and news media is an essential aspect of this, in particular the effects of iconic, symbolic and spectacular visuals and their respective effects on salience and self-efficacy. In addition, some ideas have been put forward here in an attempt to reverse the current disengagement drift. Spectacular images, and those of politicians and prominent figures clearly do not foster public engagement with climate change. In promoting engagement, a more 'grounded' local imagery, such as that showing flooding and local landscapes, and perhaps mitigation and adaptation efforts closer to home, are more likely to stimulate a shift in attitudes. Realistic future visions may also benefit communication campaigns in providing a new and hopeful manner of forging together saliency and self-efficacy. It is what the public perceive as imminent, local and achievable that will ultimately spur some sort of shift in engagement, and it is suggested that this 'closer to home' perspective, twinned with realistic and futuristic visualisations, may be the most credible method of doing so.

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