Fear is not the answer to communicating climate change

According to recent research, ‘frightening’ images of climate change may initially attract public attention, but they are also likely to disempower individuals, distancing them from the issue. The research suggests communication strategies should use more ‘enabling’ images that are relevant to the target audience in combination with these fearful images.

The impacts of climate change will be numerous and varied, ranging from changes in ecosystems to difficulties in insuring against losses caused by climate change. These impacts will affect everyone to some extent. However, engaging the public to take action is proving difficult.

New research investigated the influence of visual and iconic representations of climate change on people’s engagement with the subject, in terms of their thinking, feelings and behaviour. The researchers discussed a range of images and icons with participants in surveys, focus groups and interviews.

The results indicated that the public have a large number of images that they strongly, and easily, associate with climate change. These tend to be images of large and extreme impacts such as melting icesheets, visions of rising sea levels and intense heat and droughts.

However, these images also tend to enhance the sense that climate change happens somewhere else, to somebody else. Some individuals react to such images with a fatalistic attitude, feeling they are unable to do anything to help. Others deny climate change, rather than experience the discomfort of its reality.

While the dramatic images were judged to be the most personally important, they were also considered the most disempowering. Enabling imagery, such as an image of a tram, were seen as least personally important, yet made people feel more able to do something about climate change.

Further discussions in focus groups indicated that although dramatic images catch people’s interest, they tend to be forgotten after the initial impact. Participants felt other images were needed to communicate local relevance and the possibility of action. However, participants also agreed that global images were still necessary to highlight the importance of climate change.

The researchers conclude that while fear-provoking images certainly have a place, they must be used selectively, and with caution. If people do not feel climate change is a significant issue, using fear-provoking images is likely to cause denial, apathy and avoidance as a way of coping with the unpleasant feelings they bring.


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