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Public scares: changing the issue culture

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The communication of urgency about climate change is a central theme of many chapters in this book. But the selling of a social problem is not done in a vacuum and ultimately depends on wider social phenomena such as issue cultures, bridging metaphors, and cultural whirlwinds. For that matter, simple luck in the timing of fortuitous events can be critical. Success cannot be guaranteed for any issue to get on the radar screen of public attention, but these wider social processes provide a landscape for artful activity that can improve the chances of gaining public and media attention.

Issue cultures

Issue cultures can be defined as cognate sets of social problems that become a commanding concern in society. Perhaps the clearest example is *anything* to do with the security in the United States after the 9/11 terror attacks. Another issue culture has built around the fear of emerging diseases, ranging from Ebola and mad-cow disease though West Nile, SARS, and maybe more recently avian flu. Scientific findings or real-world events related to these problems are immediately selected for coverage by the media and often occasion attention from spokespersons in different public arenas. Social problems that can be linked to and coalesce with extant issue cultures are thus far more likely to attract sustained media and other coverage than problems that are "outliers." These problems are also likely to avoid the "balancing" predicament, where, to take a pertinent example, a handful of climate skeptics (or "contrarians") are given as much media coverage as the vast majority of climate scientists who believe that climate change poses a real threat (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; see also the chapters by McCright and Dunwoody, Chapters 12 and 5, this volume). As developed below in the discussion of cultural whirlwinds, the vortex of concern that surrounds such

problems tends to yield one-sided coverage, something that can be seen in the still relatively muted criticism in the US media of the Bush Administration's war in Iraq.

Starting around 1980 and continuing through the decade, an issue culture built up around the atmosphere as a number of social problems from this domain rose in quick succession (Ungar, 1998). The popular theory that climatic change caused the extinction of the dinosaurs was followed by a furor over the threat of nuclear winter. But the Cold War began to wind down after 1985, just in time for the discovery of the ozone hole. Here the timing is remarkable. Near the end of the 1980s, with the successful negotiations of the Montreal Protocol, the general public saw a resolution of the ozone problem coming, just in time for its sister issue, climate change, to emerge as a celebrity problem. Prior claims-making about global warming occasioned only sporadic interest in different public arenas. Now the issue was put on the map by the "greenhouse summer" of 1988 with its severe heat and drought over much of North America. The oil industry then took a hit with the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in early 1989. So strong was the public concern about the environment from the mid-1980s onward that Dunlap and Scarce (1991: 652) speak of a "miracle" of public opinion.

Clearly, proponents of a social problem would prefer to hook up with a current issue culture and thereby garner supportive coverage. However, there are limits on the deliberate marketing of a problem. One clear limit is that problems acquire a trajectory, and claims-makers are constrained by historical, scientific, and practical characteristics that accrue to the problem.[1] From the start of concerted scientific claims-making in the late 1970s, a future orientation became a "sticky" characteristic of global warming (Ungar, 2000). First, the doubling of pre-industrial CO_2 levels was not predicted to occur until about 2060. Doubling can be considered a benchmark measure, a binary that is more intuitively clear than claiming that levels have increased by, say, 40 percent. Doubling was also significant because scientists held that their computer models of the climate system were too primitive to deal with smaller changes on a shorter-term basis. At the time, scientists were only beginning to collect the long-term observations that could be used to document climate changes over time. In order to generate concern, the size of impacts delineated in scientific scenarios had to be sufficiently large or visible on a human scale (e.g., a few feet of sea-level rise, rather than a few centimeters or inches) that they would take decades to occur on a natural scale (e.g., Bernard, 1993). Finally, since computer models are still too coarse in their resolution to predict fine-scale

changes, particular extreme weather events cannot be directly attributed to climate change. By implication, efforts to reverse this trajectory and claim that "strange weather" is a sign that climate change is already occurring have largely failed (Bernard, 1993; Ungar, 1999).[2] From the point of view of selling the problem, a future orientation creates a clear discursive liability since concern about the future is discounted in virtually every institutional arena (Cline, 1992).[3]

Bridging metaphors

A second limitation on marketing a social problem derives from the availability of "bridging metaphors" to the popular culture. Scientific ideas and results are encoded in a distinct language and need to be decoded to be accessible to the public. Overall, scientific illiteracy is the norm (Shamos, 1993), and issues that break through the veil of ignorance and gain widespread public acceptance and understanding require explanation. Consider here the success of the ozone hole.

The signal advantage of the ozone hole is that it can be encapsulated in a simple, direct, and widely familiar "penetration" metaphor. Stated succinctly, the hole leads to the increased bombardment of the Earth by lethal rays. The idea of rays penetrating a damaged "shield" meshes nicely with abiding and resonant cultural motifs, including "Hollywood affinities" ranging from the shields on the Starship Enterprise to Star Wars. That the threat can be linked with Darth Vader means that it is encompassed in common-sense understandings that are deeply ingrained and widely shared. The penetration model is ubiquitous in video games and children's television shows. It is also allied with a theory that has captivated the public's imagination: the claim that an asteroid striking Earth caused the disappearance of the dinosaurs (Clemens, 1986).

The key to favorable bridging metaphors is to provide the resources for lay theorizing. If a popular cultural template affords an appropriable theory, an "object to think with" or that can be "played with" – as in Freudian analysis of dreams – it has the capacity to go beyond the scientific domain and to capture the imagination of the public at large (Turkle, 1999). This is underscored by evidence indicating that people learn more from other individuals than from any other source of information (Freudenberg and Pastor, 1991; see also Dunwoody, Chapter 5, this volume). It is conversational presence, encompassing things like talk radio and informal talk related to mundane practices, rather than media coverage per se, that can put an issue in the air and let it acquire a life of it own.

The importance of mundane metaphors that ordinary people are able to think with can be seen in a comparison of the ozone hole with climate change. Weigh up the fundamental metaphor used to frame each problem. It is apparent to anyone that a "hole" is an aberration, something that a protective shield should not have. The greenhouse effect, in contrast, seems like a benign and essential natural phenomenon (see also Bostrom and Lashof, Chapter 1, this volume). Global warming is an extension of this phenomenon, creating the problem of finding the human "fingerprint" amidst highly variable and complex natural processes.[4] More fundamentally, there are apparently no ready-made metaphors in the popular culture – as with genetically modified "Frankenfoods" – that mesh with and provide a simple schematic for understanding the science of climate change.

Cultural whirlwinds

Finally, bridging metaphors and fortuitous events can give rise to cultural whirlwinds – rapidly evolving and progressive sequences of dynamic and often surprising events that create a vortex, hurling through a variety of arenas, creating strong conversational and practical presence. Here it should be underlined how the rapid sequence of events surging through different arenas – boycotts of McDonald's and styrofoam, medical warnings about melanoma accompanied by President Reagan's timely surgery of skin cancer in 1985 and 1987, as well as political gaffes – US Interior Secretary Donald Hodel's advocacy of a "personal protection" plan instead of international action led to the retort that "fish don't wear sunglasses" – all served to unleash a whirlwind around the ozone hole.

More important over the long haul, ozone depletion holds everyday relevance for curbing exposure to the sun. In short, the problem became a fertile source of interest, anxiety, and practical knowledge, talk and action as it centered on the need to protect especially children (Ungar, 1998). It was an issue that people could discuss without feeling overwhelmed or stupefied. Bridging metaphors about "safe sun" were boosted by the growth of a companion industry encompassing sunscreens, lip gloss, sunglasses, UV-safe hats, clothing, umbrellas, awnings, and so on.[5] The issue was medicalized by reports of increased rates of skin cancer plus the personal need to watch for skin changes. At worst, people were (and still are) to avoid the sun between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., rendering the outdoors dangerous.

The prospects of global warming as a marketable problem

Issue cultures, bridging metaphors, and cultural whirlwinds cannot be concocted at will. Clearly, global warming has some real liabilities as a marketable social problem. Still, concerted efforts can be undertaken to make the most of opportunities that arise. Three such opportunities are currently on the horizon: linking climate change to extreme events, to security concerns, and to technological solutions such as energy efficiency and renewables. Can these linkages be exploited to create resonant issue cultures? Can they capture the cultural imagination?

The first of these is the most problematic, as there are acrimonious debates among scientists over whether extreme events are actually increasing (historical data are too limited, and more and more people are putting themselves in harm's way). Even if the extreme events are increasing, there is still the problem of whether any increase is in fact attributable to climate change. Security concerns and energy supplies seem to be better candidates for an emergent issue culture, especially if clear links can be drawn between the two in public discourse.

Weingart, Engels, and Pansegrau (2000) observe that in Germany dramatic warnings by a group of scientists drew an extreme picture of an "impending climatic catastrophe" that gained incredible momentum in political discourse.[6] In North America, in contrast, there has been little effort to date to link global warming to extreme weather events (Ungar, 1999; see also Leiserowitz, Chapter 2, this volume). The concatenating series of hurricanes in the summer of 2004 did engender a "blip" of media coverage, but whether or not this issue link will persist beyond one intense hurricane season is yet to be seen.[7] Not surprisingly, because of record-breaking costs from hurricanes, floods, and other unusual extreme weather events, insurance companies have been the first to jump on the global warming bandwagon.[8] For the public, this could mean painful increases in insurance premiums, especially in areas deemed to be high risk. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the public has been informed about, much less grasped, the impending threat of huge increases in insurance. Similarly, there has been no real attempt to use the issue culture that has built up around emerging diseases to draw attention to the disease burden that is likely to ensue from climate change (see also Leiserowitz, Chapter 2, this volume). Clearly, there are numerous cultural images (and frequent reminders from the real world) of extreme events, physical destruction, and harm to humans that would resonate with a wide population. The obvious limitation of building an issue culture around extremes is scientific credibility and the

problem of constructively engaging people, as many feel powerless in the face of such events (see the chapters by Bostrom and Lashof, and Moser, Chapters 1 and 3, this volume).

Undoubtedly, the selling of fear in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks has been an unparalleled success (but in other cases it can fail to motivate; see Moser and Dilling, 2004). Security concerns have dominated much public and political discourse since those terror attacks, not just in the United States, but more recently also in Europe. But the insurgency in Iraq coupled with rising oil prices and discussions of oil depletion are once again throwing into relief America's dependence on foreign oil. If oil prices remain high, energy dependence and (radical) reassessments of the energy economy could well emerge as a prevailing issue culture. Global warming may then become part of a larger discourse that may well be of greater interest and concern to Americans (including politicians in Washington) than climate change on its own.

Finally, the marketing of energy efficiency and alternative energy sources could be done without drawing links to global warming (see, e.g., the chapters by Young; Arroyo and Preston; and Dilling and Farhar, Chapters 24, 21, and 23, this volume); but the latter adds a robust dimension to the problem and can be aligned with a no-regrets policy and possibly more compelling bridging metaphors. The potential significance of an issue culture built around energy efficiency and alternative energy sources is underscored by the apparent inadequacy of the Kyoto process, as discussed by Taverne (2005). Beyond increased opposition by economists, neither the United States, India, nor China – all of which are building many new coal-fired power stations and together will emit most greenhouse gases – are currently willing to commit to mandatory limits on their greenhouse gases. Taverne cites Tony Blair as saying: "If we don't have America, China and India taking the action necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, then we don't solve the problem of climate change." Taverne cogently argues that this will necessitate greater focus on technology and research and development – rather than targeted emission reductions and attendant penalties for failure to meet them (the latter is an aspect of Kyoto that garners little notice). The rapid development of new technologies, combined with the rapid application of the best available technologies, appears to be the response of choice at this point. This encompasses everything from using the best available technology for coal-burning plants to the production and purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles down to the selection of light bulbs.

Technological fixes already have considerable cultural resonance; the desire for such solutions reflects deeply held values in Western culture.

Hollywood stars have recently made it trendy to own fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles like the Toyota Prius, a sign that many more opportunities may be there for the taking. Here it is imperative to avoid past mistakes and not sell energy efficiency as a return to the simple life. Instead, energy efficiency can be an involving practice that requires bottom–up campaigns to increase voluntary actions and adoption of more efficient tools and practices, as well as top–down mandatory standard setting and incentive programs (see also Dilling and Farhar, Chapter 23, this volume). With recycling, much of the push to develop and extend programs came from ordinary people, as it afforded them opportunities for concrete involvement and understanding. The curbside recycling box became a common sight and drove home the beneficial impacts of individual actions. The halocline days of the SUV seem to have passed, and the advent of much smaller hybrids in every driveway promises to ease air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and even parking problems. Ultimately, however, the trick will not be done by technological fixes but in the emergence of relevant issue cultures and potent bridging metaphors that engage a wide population in the necessary behavior and political change. It would be nice if one could suggest what these might be, but they are best regarded as emergent elements of ongoing efforts to confront the threat of climate change.

Notes

1. Claims-making is central to the sociology of social movements, since in the absence of successful claims about a (deteriorating) condition, the problem will not be recognized and hence acted upon. Claims-makers can be individuals and groups and can include scientists, environmentalists, politicians, policy-makers, and so on. Key issues include the power of claims-makers, the nature of their claims, and their strategies for pressing them.
2. The increased media attention to the severe storm–climate change link during the hurricane series in 2004 may be the first indication of this changing, but whether or not the public discourse shifts to a greater orientation toward the here and now remains to be seen.
3. NIMTOO – a common acronym for Not In My Term Of Office – further illustrates how political actors treat even short-term future considerations with less significance than the more "vivid" and "pressing" problems operating in real time.
4. Scientists use "fingerprint" to capture the difficulty of finding the human signature. People are more likely to notice a footprint, and a large one at that.
5. In addition to the "companion industry," which produced the means to save oneself from harmful UV rays, another industry emerged around the technological innovations that allowed replacement of ozone-destroying substances, albeit somewhat less visible than the safety products industry.
6. Climate catastrophes were termed "Klima-SuperGAU," a term still resonant from the hey-days of the anti-nuclear movement in Germany, which had coined the term "GAU" – greatest imaginable nuclear accident.
7. So strong is the popular culture in North America that it took the rather ridiculous film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, to spawn some public discussion of abrupt climate change (Leiserowitz, 2004). Note also that an increasingly politicized debate was spawned in late 2004 and 2005 over the linkage between hurricanes and climate change as two rather

visible scientists clashed over the issue in public, but the issue has not (yet) gained wider public attention.

8. For example, see http://www.abi.org.uk/climatechange (accessed January 5, 2006) for recent studies and press releases dealing with climate change and the British Insurance industry.

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