

Getting the Message: Audience Resonance with Australian Climate Change Campaigns

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the climate change campaigns being conducted by seven environmental non-government organisations (NGOs) in Australia to determine how campaign messages are perceived by the intended audiences. The research examines whom the NGOs are targeting, and whether the messages resonate with these audiences.

This paper compares the impressions of campaign effectiveness of the NGO campaigners against those of their identified audience groups. This comparison is presented in recognition that, as Giugni identifies, “[social movement success] is in large part subjectively assessed. Movement participants and external observers may have different perceptions of the success of a given action.”¹

2. NGO activities and intended audiences

This paper is based on the findings from twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2004 and January 2006 with both campaign staff working in environmental NGOs as well as the audiences the NGOs sought to influence. The NGOs discussed in the paper include the Climate Action Network Australia (CANA), the Minerals Policy Institute (MPI), Rising Tide, Friends of the Earth (FoE), the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), WWF Australia, and Greenpeace.

The Australian NGOs included in this paper consider government actions to address the projected impacts of human-induced climate change are inadequate. The term ‘NGOs’ describes not-for-profit advocacy organisations focused primarily on environmental issues. These organisations undertake research, campaigns and advocacy to influence decisions of the ‘institutional elite’ for social and political outcomes with benefits beyond the organisation’s own membership.²

The NGO interview participants identified a variety of target audiences, to be discussed in an extended version of this paper, and which reflects the variety of activities and strategies they are undertaking. For the purposes of this paper, these target audiences have been termed ‘community’, ‘media’, ‘politicians’, ‘industry’ and ‘policy-makers’.

3. NGO and audience perspectives on campaigns

In the following sections, the perspectives of the NGOs regarding their campaigns' effectiveness are contrast with those of their audiences.

A. Community

Many of the NGOs were optimistic about the reception of their campaigns by the 'community'. CANA felt it had moderate success, stating that people are concerned, but not concerned enough to take action, as they are also "overwhelmed and confused" by the complexity and size of the climate change issue.³ MPI identified the community as the best recipient of their messages, but identified that they "are still marginalised voices in government policy outcomes."⁴ Rising Tide was more optimistic, having seen "good turnouts" to its events and responsiveness to their street stalls.⁵ FoE believed that their messages have resonated easily with civil society, and stated "most people would say yes, it's [climate change] happening."⁶ WWF considered that community awareness has significantly increased, saying "the level of knowledge and discussion about climate change is double what it was ... [and] has certainly helped ... 'prime' Australian society for change."⁷ However, ACF saw the NGO campaign at a "crossroads," where the focus of community campaigns until now has been on the "elite," educated and professional part of the community. ACF's Erwin Jackson argued that NGOs must now build "tomorrow's movement [that] seeks significant societal and economic change through strong mainstream support."⁸

It is difficult to ascertain general community perceptions through interviews, so this analysis is based on several major surveys. These found climate change is not an environmental issue that is at the "top of mind" for many Australians. A NSW government survey in 2003 found that only three percent of people in NSW named 'greenhouse effect/ global warming/ climate' as the most important environmental issue in NSW.⁹ One of the reasons that may lie behind the low level of concern is poor understanding of climate change. The Australian Greenhouse Office's 2003 national survey found that only 12 percent correctly identified the burning of fossil fuels as the major contributor to climate change.¹⁰ The 2003 NSW survey argued that education and information have increased people's level of knowledge about climate change between 1994 and 2003.¹¹ This may have been achieved in part by the mass media, as the 2003 national survey found it to be the main source of information about climate change issues.¹² These findings support the NGOs' decisions to build community awareness and calls for action, and to reach people through the media.

B. Media

The NGOs recognise that the media plays an important role in broadcasting their messages. However, as Maddison and Scalmer describe, “in an increasingly media-saturated present, social movements have had to find often spectacular means of generating media and community interest in their action.”¹³ Climate change is a particularly difficult issue to portray. An anonymous NGO campaigner reflected that “popularising” climate change for uptake in the media is a difficult task. This campaigner also observed that media attention can be a “double-edged sword,” where groups with significant coverage risk losing media currency.¹⁴

The journalists interviewed had a number of criticisms and suggestions for NGOs’ interaction with the media. A newspaper Opinions editor stated “climate change is not a specific issue of interest,” and is only included in his section if the particular angle of a story or action is “novel, challenges thinking or advances discussion.”¹⁵ For his paper, climate change presents a very polarised and radical issue that is “demonstrative of scientists and NGOs up against the federal government and industry lobby.”¹⁶ A former environment reporter explained that newspaper journalism is about newness and conflict, and that since the Federal government’s action on policy is minimal at this moment, climate change is currently a story of “nothing happening, so it’s no news.”¹⁷

These journalists urged NGOs to use an approach and language in their advocacy on climate change in a credible and balanced way. One journalist stressed “environmental groups are good lobbyists but cannot differentiate between proselytising [and providing informed comment].”¹⁸ Another journalist criticised the emphasis he felt is placed on “scare-mongering” and fear-based messages. For him, this approach reduced the NGOs’ credibility.¹⁹

C. Politicians

WWF’s Reynolds acknowledged that “the political environment is quite a tough one.”²⁰ In support of this, CANA’s Richards said, “we can’t have [influenced politicians], otherwise we would have better climate policy.”²¹ Rising Tide’s Phillips reflected that “NGOs got the debate happening but [this] hasn’t translated into political gains.”²²

A former NSW Minister for Resources, Kim Yeadon, believed that the NGO focus on renewable energy and demand management positively contributed to the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target scheme.²³ He implored NGOs to “better understand the political system” and the process by which an NGO’s “politically unattainable” demands may be modified for acceptance into government policy. Furthermore,

according to Yeadon, politicians are seeking positive public feedback from NGOs on the policies and actions. Yet, this feedback rarely arrived because “you can never satisfy the environment movement – you’ve never done enough.”²⁴ A political advisor identified the real obstacle for NGO effectiveness was in building broader community support at the electorate level, rather than relying on the ‘elite’, educated community’s support and action on the issue.²⁵

D. Energy-intensive and Electricity Industry

The response by industry to pressure and campaigns from environmental NGOs was mixed, according to CANA’s Julie-Anne Richards. She considered the Greenpeace-led campaign that halted shale oil extraction in Queensland a “stand out success,” while the contested Hazelwood power plant in Victoria has proceeded despite a collaborative NGO campaign.²⁶ MPI was positive about certain companies’ willingness to consider alternatives to coal-generated electricity, but Geoff Evans said “the commitments of the major generators remains minimal, though hopefully will grow.”²⁷ Erwin Jackson felt that ACF built good relationships with both business and government officers, one that is both pragmatic and open to discussion.²⁸ An ACF campaigner observed, “I was surprised to find how advanced these companies all are in ... their commitment to [action on] climate change.”²⁹ Another campaigner also commended engaging industry to, “get the corporate sector feeling good and get debate happening.”³⁰

Industries that have high greenhouse emissions, either through manufacturing or electricity production, held a variety of views on the effectiveness of the approaches that NGOs are using. Many interview participants considered that aspects of the NGO campaigns had been effective. The Australian Industry Greenhouse Network’s John Daley appreciated ‘business-aware’ NGO approaches.³¹ A Rio Tinto manager commended some NGO actions, such as ACF’s policy position on carbon dioxide storage underground (‘geosequestration’), as a positive example of productive NGO engagement on climate change.³² However, a particularly strong critique came from a participant in the renewable energy industry. He felt that the NGOs could have played their politics “smarter,” with more behind-the-scenes emphasis on negotiation and discussion, rather than creating a polarised public political debate.³³

Despite varying perspectives, some interview participants from industry felt there were significant areas where their industries shared the same agenda as NGOs focused on climate change concerns. The CIF’s Ritchie described the common agenda broadly, acknowledging “climate change is occurring and needs more action.”³⁴ Similarly, Rio Tinto’s

official position is that “in order to avoid human caused changes to the climate the world must reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.”³⁵ An energy supplier found that his company joined with many NGOs in calling for a national economic instrument (such as a carbon tax) as an alternative to the current “hodge-podge of policies.”³⁶

E. Policy-Makers

The campaigns’ effects on political decision-making are mixed, according to the NGOs. CANA’s Richards believed their efforts have been unsuccessful at a federal level, but she was encouraged by Western Australia’s decision to move towards gas-generated electricity.³⁷ MPI was despondent that state governments such as NSW still support new coal mines but pleased that they now acknowledge the process to establish new mines is now more difficult “as community awareness and resistance grows.”³⁸ Anna Reynolds was pleased with the attention that WWF’s campaigns on coal-fired power stations was being given by policy-makers, although this was not at the highest decision-making level.³⁹

The policy-makers interviewed both commended and criticised environmental NGO activities that had come to their attention. One policy officer considered that the new and “unnatural” lobbying alliances, such as the Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change, created a strong voice that engaged well with the private sector.⁴⁰ Another policy officer commended the contributions the NGOs are making to advisory groups.⁴¹ An economist praised WWF as “attuned to being part of the policy debate [and] considering the economic impacts,” but he criticised other NGOs as “aiming for media headlines.”⁴² A policy officer highlighted the impact that specific individuals can make, and mentioned several long-term NGO campaigners who had “provided excellent intellectual contributions to the debate on both national and international [climate] policy-making.”⁴³

Strong critique came from a former policy-maker who lamented the lack of “follow-through” by environmental NGOs in the efforts to engage with the policy-making process. He considered that personal interactions needed to go beyond *ad hoc* meetings with the Premier and other “friendly” power-holders. He encouraged NGOs to “leverage” off their submissions: circulate them to relevant ministers and bureaucrats, seek follow-up meetings, pursue consistent contact, and brief the media. An economist warned against the tendency he observes in environmental NGOs towards “sensationalism” of weather events not scientifically linked to climate change, and to “impractical” policy prescriptions.⁴⁴ This was supported by a former government climate scientist who felt NGOs placed “too much emphasis on doom and gloom without sufficient recognition of

the uncertainties.” This scientist lamented that NGOs have not provided the potential bridge between policy-makers and the “real coal-face climate scientists” who may “feel unable to speak publicly because it makes them look biased and reduces their credibility with policy-makers and could affect their funding.”⁴⁵

6. Conclusions

Two main observations can be drawn from this research. Firstly, NGOs are communicating their concerns to a range of specific audiences. The new alliances with business, the medical profession, scientists, academics and others appear to have been well-received and strengthened the credibility of the climate change issue. However, the findings from the community and media reinforce the challenge of making climate change messages resonate with audiences. Furthermore, the message is acted upon often in an unexpected manner that is beyond the NGOs’ control. This loss of control may be due to the lack of obvious solutions advocated in the campaign messages, which place greater emphasis on scientific projections and potential impacts. Indeed, some NGO campaigners interviewed for this research sought to provide more community solutions to counteract the perception that projected climate change is a ‘scientific’ issue that can only be ‘solved’ by governments and scientists.

While this first observation suggests that NGOs are effective at raising general awareness and ‘agenda creation’, the second observation is that social and policy change appears to not be happening, or happening very slowly. NGOs working on climate change appear less politically effective at the ‘policy creation’ part of the policy cycle. While policy creation is a campaign area requiring further consideration, this raises the question of whether this role is too much to expect of Australian NGOs, given that unsecured legitimacy and poor resources were two common themes in the interviews with NGO campaigners. NGOs are seeking legitimacy with a wide range of audiences, described as the five general groups in this research. However, as described here, not all of these audiences accept this legitimacy, and to challenge this notion in one group may alienate another. Low resources can impact the breadth of campaign focus and prioritisation within an NGO, which in turn has implications on the ability to tailor messages to reach their target audiences.

These two findings lead to the important question of the overall effectiveness of climate change campaigns in Australia. However, it must be noted that these observations and questions have been drawn from a series of perspectives of interview participants. Political effectiveness is difficult to adequately assess from the perspectives provided here, especially given the breadth of definitions and criteria employed by

various researchers who are active on these questions. Further research on the question of effectiveness in relation to these campaigns would be fruitful, and would provide the basis for specific campaign and strategic recommendations.

Notes

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- 6 Stephanie Long, Friends of the Earth, *pers. comm.*, 20 October 2005; Cam Walker, Friends of the Earth Australia, *pers. comm.*, 19 November 2004.
- 7 Anna Reynolds, WWF Australia, *pers. comm.*, 2 December 2004.
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- 16 Media journalist 'Anon. 2,' *pers. comm.*, 7 November 2005.
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- 18 Media journalist 'Anon. 1'.
- 19 Media journalist 'Anon. 2'.

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21 Richards, 2005.

22 Phillips.

23 Kim Yeadon, NSW Member of Parliament, *pers. comm.*, 24 October 2005.

24 Ibid.

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30 NGO campaigner 'Anon. 1,' *pers. comm.*, 8 December 2004.

31 John Daley, Australian Industry Greenhouse Network, *pers. comm.*, 7 November 2005.

32 Fiona Nicholls, Rio Tinto, *pers. comm.*, 13 December 2005.

33 Industry staffer 'Anon. 1,' *pers. comm.*, 10 November 2005.

34 Stuart Ritchie, Cement Industry Federation, *pers. comm.*, 25 October 2005.

35 Nicholls.

36 Industry staffer 'Anon. 2,' *pers. comm.*, 15 December 2005.

37 Richards, 2005.

38 Evans.

39 Anna Reynolds, Worldwide Fund for Nature, *pers. comm.*, 8 November 2005.

40 Policy officer 'Anon. 1,' *pers. comm.*, 15 October 2005.

41 Policy officer 'Anon. 4,' *pers. comm.*, 12 December 2005.

42 Michael Hitchens, Economist, *pers. comm.*, 24 October 2005.

43 Policy officer 'Anon. 4'.

44 Hitchens.

45 Barrie Pittock, climate scientist, *pers. comm.*, 24 December 2005.

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