

How “Inconvenient” is Al Gore's Climate Message?

- [Karey Harrison](#)
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The release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and his subsequent training of thousands of Climate Presenters marks a critical transition point in communication around climate change.

An analysis of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* presentation and of the guidelines we were taught as Presenters in *The Climate Project*, show they reflect the marketing principles that the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report *Weathercocks and Signposts* (Crompton) argues cannot achieve the systemic and transformational changes required to address global warming.

This paper will consider the ultimate effectiveness of social marketing approaches to Climate change communication and the Al Gore *Climate Project* in the light of the WWF critique.

Both the film and the various slideshow presentations of *An Inconvenient Truth* conclude with a series of suggestions about how to “how to start” changing “the way you live.” The audience is urged to:

- *Reduce your own emissions*
- *Switch to green power*
- *Offset the rest*
- *Spread the word*

The focus on changing individual consumption in *An Inconvenient Truth* is also reflected in the climate campaign page [Get Involved](#) on the website of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF)—the Australian partner in Al Gore’s *The Climate Project* (TCP).

Al Gore’s *Climate Project*, with over 3,000 Climate Presenters worldwide, could be seen as a giant experimental test of the merits of marketing approaches to social change as compared to the recommendations in the WWF critique authored by Crompton.

In *Orion* magazine, Derrick Jensen has described this emphasis on “personal consumption” instead of “organized political resistance” as “a campaign of systematic misdirection.”

Jensen points out that “even if every person in the United States did everything the movie suggested, U.S. carbon emissions would fall by only 22 percent.”

The latest scientific reports show we are on the edge of a tipping point into catastrophic climate change—runaway warming which would render the planet uninhabitable for most life forms, including humans (Hansen *et al* 13). To reduce the risk of catastrophic climate change to a still worrying 13% we need significant action between now and 2012, and carbon dioxide levels will need to be stabilised at between 350 and 375 parts per million by 2050 (Elzen and Meinshausen 17).

Because Americans and Australians are taking far more than our share of the global atmospheric commons, we need to reduce our emissions to less than 90% below 1990 levels by 2050 as our share of the global emission reduction targets (Elzen and Meinshausen 24; Garnaut 283).

In other words, if one takes the science seriously there is a huge shortfall between the reductions which can be achieved by individual changes to consumption and the scale of reductions that are required to reduce the risk of catastrophic climate change to a half-way tolerable level. The actions being promoted as solutions are nowhere near “inconvenient” enough to solve the problem.

Like Crompton and Jensen I was inclined to take the gap between goal and means as overwhelming evidence for the inadequacy of marketing approaches emphasising changes to individual consumption choices. Like them I was concerned that the emphasis on consumption in marketing approaches may even reinforce the consumerism and materialism that drives the growth in emissions.

Whilst being generally critical of marketing approaches, Crompton says he accepts the importance marketers place on tailoring the message to fit the motivations of the target audience (25). However, while Crompton describes Rose and Dade’s “Values Modes analysis” as “a sophisticated technique for audience segmentation” (21), he rejects the campaign strategies designed around the target audiences they identify (23).

Market segmentation provides communications practitioners with the “extensive knowledge of whom you are trying to reach and what moves them” which is one of the “three must haves” of a successful communication campaign (Fenton 3).

Rose and Dade’s segmentation analysis categorises people based on the motivational hierarchy in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. They identify three population groupings—the Settlers, driven by security; the Prospectors, esteem driven; and the Pioneers, who are motivated by intrinsic values (1).

As with Maslow’s hierarchy these “Values Modes” are developmentally dynamic. The satisfaction of more basic needs, like physical safety and economic security, support a developmental pathway to the next level. Just as the satisfaction of the need for social acceptance and status free the individual to become motivated by self-actualisation, universal and compassionate ethics, and transcendence.

Because individuals move in and out of Values Modes, depending on the degree to which economic, social and political conditions facilitate the satisfaction of their needs, the percentage of the population in each group varies across time and location (Rose and Dade 1).

In 2007 the UK population was 20% Settlers, 40% Prospectors, and 40% Pioneers (Rose and Dade 1), but the distribution in other countries would need to be determined empirically. Rose et al provide a strategic rationale for a marketing based climate campaign targeted at changing the behaviours of Prospectors, rather than appealing to Pioneers.

While the Pioneers are 40% of the population, they don't like being "marketed at," they seek out information for themselves and make up their own minds, and "will often have already considered your ideas and decided what to do" (6). They are also well catered for by environmental groups' existing ethical and issues based campaigns (3).

Prospectors, on the other hand, are the 40% of the population which are the "least reached" by existing ethical or issues oriented environmental campaigning; are the most enthusiastic (or "voracious") consumers, so their choices will sway business; and they tend to be swinging voters, so if their opinions change it will sway politicians (4).

Rose *et al* (13) found that in order to appeal to Prospectors a climate change communications campaign should:

- Refer to local, visible, negative changes involving loss or damage
- [In the UK] show the significance of UK emissions and those of normal people (i.e. like them)
- Use interest in homes and gardens
- Deploy the nag factor of their children
- Create offers which are above all easy, cost-effective, instant and painless

Prospectors don't like, and will be put off by campaigns that (Rose et al 13):

- Talk about the implications: too remote and they are not very bothered
- Use messengers (voices) which lack authority or could be challenged
- Criticise behaviours (e.g. wrong type of car, 'wasting' energy in your home)
- Ask them to give things up
- Ask them to be the first to change (amongst their peers)
- Invoke critical judgement by others

Crompton recommends an environmental campaign that attempts to persuade Prospectors that they are wrong in thinking material consumption and "ostentatious displays of wealth" contribute to their happiness. Prospectors see precisely these sorts of comments by Concerned Ethicals as a judgemental

criticism of their love of things, and a denial of their need for the acceptance and approval of others.

Maslow's developmental model, as well as the Value Modes research, would suggest that Crompton's proposal is the exact opposite of what is required to move Prospectors into the Pioneer value mode. It is by accepting the values people have, and allowing them to meet the needs that drive them, that they can move on to more intrinsically motivated action.

Crompton would appear to fall into the common "NGO or public sector campaign [...] trap" of devising a campaign based on what will appeal to the 10% of the population that are Concerned Ethicals, but in the process "particularly annoy or intimidate" the strategically significant 40% of the population that are Prospectors (Rose *et al* 8).

Crompton ignores the evidence from marketing campaign research that campaigns can't directly change people's basic motivations, while they can change people's behaviours if they target their existing motivations.

Contrary to Crompton's claim that promoting green consumption will reinforce consumerism and materialism (16), Rose and Dade base their campaign strategy on the results of research into cognitive dissonance, which show that if you can get someone to act a certain way, they will alter their beliefs and preferences, as well as their self concept, to fit with their actions.

Crompton confuses a tactic in a larger game, with the end goal of the game. "The trick is to get them to do the behaviour, not to develop the opinion" (Rose, "VBCOP" 2). Prospectors are persuaded to adopt a behaviour if they see it as "in," and as what everyone else like them is doing. They are more easily persuaded to buy a product than adopt some other sort of behavioural change.

The next part of an environmental marketing strategy like this is to label, praise and reward the behaviour (Futerra 11). Rose suggests that Prospectors can be engaged politically if governments are called on to recognise and reward the behaviour "say by giving them a tax break or paying them for their rooftop energy contribution" ("VBCOP" 3). Once governments have given such rewards, both Settlers and Propectors will fight to keep them, where they are normally disinclined to fight political battles.

Once Prospectors identify themselves as, for example, in favour of renewable energy, politicians can be persuaded they need to act to get and keep votes, and business can be persuaded to change in order to continue to attract buyers for their products.

In order to achieve the scale of emission reductions required individuals need to change their consumption patterns; politicians need to change the regulatory and planning context in which both individual and corporate decisions are made; and the economic system needs to be transformed so it internalises environmental costs and operates within environmental limits. Social marketing analyses have identified changing Prospectors buying habits as the wedge, or

leverage point that can lead to such a cascading set of social, political and economic changes.

Just as changing Prospector product choices can be exploited as a key leverage point, Al Gore identified getting United States commitment to emission reduction as a key leverage point towards achieving global commitments to binding reduction targets.

Because the United States had the highest national greenhouse emissions, and was one of the two industrialised countries who had failed to sign the Kyoto Protocol, changing behaviour and belief in the United States was strategically critical to achieving global action on emissions reduction.

Al Gore initially attempted to get the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol and commit to emission reduction by working directly at the political level, without building the popular support for action that would encourage other politicians to support his proposals.

In the movie, Al Gore talks about the defeat of his initial efforts to get the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol, and of his recognition of the need to gain wider public support before political action would be taken. He talks about the unsuitability of the mass news media as a vehicle for achieving social and political change on climate emissions.

The priority given to conflict as a news value means journalists focus on the personalities involved in disputes about climate change rather than provide an analysis of the issue. When climate experts explain the consensus position of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), they are "balanced" with opposing statements from the handful of (commonly fossil fuel industry funded) climate deniers. Because climate emissions are part of a complex process of slow change occurring over long time lines they do not fit easily into standard news values like timeliness, novelty and proximity (Harrison).

When Al Gore realised he wouldn't be able to gain the wider public support he needed through the mass news media he began a quest to spread his message "meeting by meeting," "person by person." Al Gore turned his slide show into a movie in order to deliver the message to more people than he could reach face to face, and then trained Presenters to reach even more people.

When the movie won an Oscar for Best Documentary it turned Al Gore into something of a celebrity. Al Gore's celebrity status rubs off on Climate Presenters through their association with him, giving them access to community and business groups across the world. When a celebrity recommends or displays a behaviour, Prospectors are more likely to see it as the in thing and thus more willing to do the recommended action. The movie created an opportunity for Al Gore to be a more persuasive messenger than he had been as a politician.

Al Gore began *The Climate Project* to increase the impact of the movie and spread the message further than he could take it by himself. The multiplication of modes of communicating the message fits with Fenton Communications' "Rule of Three." In *Now Hear This* they say the target audience "should read about us

in the paper, see us on TV, hear about us from a neighbour and a friend [...] have their kid mention us [...] and so on" (17). The Presenter training emphasises the "direct communication, especially face to face" recommended by Rose ("To do" 174).

During the Presenter training Al Gore warned of the danger of being too negative as it risked moving people "from denial to despair without stopping to act," and of the need to present the story in such a way as to create hope. This is backed up by the communications marketing literature, which warns that "negative messages may actually induce despair and actually [sic] paralysis while the positive focus can inspire" (Boykoff 172).

While it employs dramatic visual images and animations, the movie tends to downplay the potential severity of the consequences of runaway global warming, and presents these in a way that gives the impression of a contracted time frame for the consequences of warming in order to activate motivation based on near term implications.

The movie responds to Prospectors' disinterest in distant implication of climate change by emphasising near-term threats, such as the rising monetary cost of damages, as well as threats to life and property from disease, drought, fire, flood, storm, and rising sea levels.

After training an initial round of American Presenters, Al Gore identified training Australian Presenters as the next strategic priority. While Australia's collective emissions are small, our per capita emissions are higher than those of Americans, and as the only other industrialised nation that had not signed, it was believed our becoming a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol would increase the pressure on the United States to sign.

The ACF provided Australian Presenters with additional slides containing vivid images of Australian impacts, and Presenters were encouraged to find their own examples to illustrate impacts relevant to specific local audiences. The importance of identifying local impacts to persuade and move their audiences is impressed upon Presenters during the training. Regular slide updates reinforce this priority.

While authors like Crompton and Jensen note the emphasis on changes in consumption as suggested solutions to climate change, other elements of the presentation are just as important in appealing to Prospectors.

Prospectors want to belong and gain status by doing whatever is highly regarded by others. The presentation has numerous slides emphasising who else has made commitments to Kyoto and emission reduction. The American presentation includes lists of other countries, and towns and states in the United States that had signed up to Kyoto. The Australian presentation includes graphics emphasising the overwhelming number of Australians who support action.

Prospectors don't like being asked to give things up, and the presentation insists on the high cost of failing to act, compared to the small cost of acting now. Doing something to stop climate change is presented as easy and achievable.

Contrary to Crompton's claim that promoting green consumption would not build the widespread awareness and support for the more far-reaching government action that is required to achieve systemic change (9), the results of recent opinion research show that upwards of 80% of Americans support effective and wide-ranging action to reduce emissions and develop new renewable energy technologies (*Climate Checklist*).

Whereas it would not have been surprising if the financial crisis had dimmed the degree of enthusiasm for action to reduce greenhouse emissions, the high support for action on climate change in their polling continues to encourage the Australian government to use it as a wedge issue against the opposition. Without high levels of public support, there would be little or no chance that politicians would be willing to vote for measures that will reduce emissions.

That the push for change in individual consumption choices was only ever one tactic in a wider campaign is also demonstrated by the other projects instigated by Al Gore and his team. Projects like [RepoWEr America](#) and [WE can solve the climate crisis](#) leverage the interest developed by the Climate Project to increase public pressure on politicians to support regulatory change.

The *RepoWEr America* and *WE can solve the climate crisis* sites target individuals as citizens and make it easy for them to participate in the political process. Forms help them sign petitions, write letters and meet with their elected officials, write for newspapers and call in to talkback radio, and organise local community meetings or events. Al Gore's own web site adds a link to the [Live Earth](#) company to add to these arsenals. *Live Earth* "creates innovative, engaging events and media that challenge global leaders, local communities and every individual to actively participate in solving our planet's urgent environmental crises."

These sites provide the infrastructure to make it easy for individuals to move into action in the political domain. But they do it in ways that will appeal to Prospectors. They involve fun, their actions are celebrated, prizes are offered, the number of people involved is emphasised so they feel part of the "happening" thing. *RepoWEr America* and *WE can solve the climate crisis* help Prospectors to engage in political action in order to achieve regulatory change.

Finally, or first, Al Gore's Generation Investment Management Company, operating since 2004, is oriented towards systemic transformation in the economic system, so that economic drivers are aligned with sustainability imperatives. Al Gore and his partner David Blood reject Gross Domestic Product—the current measure of economic growth, and a major driver of unsustainable economic activity—as "dangerously imprecise in its ability to account for natural and human resources" and challenge business to accept the "need to internalize externalities" in order to create a sustainable economy.

In their *Thematic Research Highlights*, Al Gore's Generation company critiques the "Hedonic Treadmill"—which puts "material gains ahead of personal happiness" (32), and challenges "governments, companies, and individuals [...] to broaden their scope of responsibility to match their sphere of influence" (13).

While the *Climate Project* would appear to ignore the inadequacy of individual consumption change as a means of emission reduction, the information and analysis targeted at business by Generation demonstrates this has not been ignored in the overall strategy to achieve systemic change. Al Gore suggests that material consumption should no longer be the measure of economic welfare, an argument he backs with an analysis showing business that long term wealth creation depends on accepting environmental and social sustainability as priorities.

While *An Inconvenient Truth* promotes consumption change as the (inadequate) solution to Global Warming, this is just one strategically chosen tactic in a much larger and coordinated campaign to achieve systemic change through regulatory change and transformation of the economic system.

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