Climate Change, Warnings And The Car Alarm Problem

Most campaigns focus on a problem. Those that promote a solution, need the problem to create a dialectic for 'news' or a psychological fulcrum for action. The 'alignment stage' of the Motivational Sequence – awareness > alignment > engagement> action - needs to get the sender and receiver 'on the same page' about the problem and the solution before you can move along towards action. And a solution without a problem is not a solution. Meanwhile, whereas a problem without a solution is a tragedy: one with a solution is a scandal, as it is avoidable. Finally, problem and solution need to be specific, they need to fit together like lock and key [1].

We are all about to be battered by a wave of problem-pushing on climate change, as the most important international climate talks ever are due to take place in Copenhagen in December [2]. Campaigners, politicians and media will deploy a host of strategies to try and push action. Seized of the problem when others do not seem to be, it is natural that activists should turn to sounding the alarm as perhaps the most basic strategy of all. For instance the UK Climate Change Campaign [3] is currently publicising its *Climate Emergency Rally* (December 5th London), while the US-based Avaaz recently reported to its supporters "more than 100,000 Avaaz members took part in the worldwide vote about whether we should go all out to organise a massive global wake-up call on climate change on September 21, and over 96% of us voted YES!".

Activists will respond to such calls, which is great. But will it work in terms of convincing others ? And what does make alarms work anyway ?

Emergency - Emergency !

Not surprisingly, there is actually a large body of research on why alarms do and don't achieve their intended purpose. Most of this comes from the 'alarm industry', that is alarms designed to warn operators or workers of an acute hazard, and from studies of responses to flooding (awareness, perception of risk, preparation, evacuation, recovery) but much of that is also relevant to climate and other attempts to 'sound an alarm' in campaigns, because it is all about basic human behavioural psychology.

At his useful website Marc Green writes [4]:

'…recent research suggests that effective warning design depends as much on the contents of the viewer's head as on the contents of the warning's message. People who see a warning must decide whether or not to comply. However, "warning viewers" (people for whom the warning is intended) are not blanks slates but rather start with a mental model containing three components. First, the viewer has general knowledge about the world and how it works. Second, s/he has a set of beliefs and expectations based on experience with the same or similar environment, product or technology. Lastly, the viewer enters the situation with a goal and strategy for achieving that goal. The goal can be specific ("I want to arrive at my destination as soon as possible") or more diffuse ("I want to feel good about myself"). Understanding what the viewer "brings to the table" is critical for creating effective warnings.'

Although he is talking mainly about visual warnings, the underlying processes apply to the spread or not of campaign alarms through networks and the media, and whether they are noticed or engage and lead to any form of action.

In a 2000 paper [5] in the *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, Denis Loreti and Lori Peek provide an instructive analysis of why people do or don't respond to warnings associated with nuclear power stations.

Loreti and Peek note that 'the perceptions that are formed in emergencies follow the same processes as those formed in response to any other social event'. They say that the basic process 'is the sequence hear –perceive -- under-stand, believe, and personalize–respond-decide about alternative protective actions and perform them'. If NGOs and other campaigners are to use the 'Wake Up' or 'Emergency' 'Alarm' frame [6] for any issue, eg 'climate' then their communication has to pass the tests of the frame.

Loreti and Peek point out:

'the risk information must be understood. Understanding is not meant to refer simply to interpretation, but also to the attachment of meaning to the information. Those meanings can vary among people and may or may not conform to the understandings intended. A 50% probability may be interpreted as almost certain by some or relatively unlikely by others. In this sense, understanding includes the perception of risk'

It hardly needs be said that relatively few people understand the layers of probabilities involved in climate scenarios, and fewer understand the differences in perception. When confronted with something we don't understand we use 'heuristics' - rules of thumb - to help make a decision. Eg: "its from a source I like so it's probably true", or the converse, or "it's like a one of those or one of these so I'll judge it like that, or its familiar (so probably true)", or "I owe them so I'll go along with it". [7] Similarly we tend to respond more strongly to prospective loss than gain, and over-estimate the likelihood of recurrence of those events that have occurred recently. However many campaigns seem to ignore these realities.

In the case of 'alarms' the signs and signals are important. 'Environmental cues' say Loreti and Peek:

'which are the physical characteristics of the setting in which the public receives emergency information, interact with the information factors [previously described]. For example, it is more difficult to get a public to believe a flood warning on a sunny day or if neighbors are not seen leaving in concert with receiving evacuation instructions. Location of the risk or geographical proximity of those at risk to the impending threat is another physical factor that affects the perception formation process. Such environmental cues impact the perceptions of understanding, believing, personalizing, as well as actual action'

Numerous studies of floods for example show that people tend to move towards, not away from the source of the hazard, in order to assess it. For example they will walk to a levee or wall and stand there watching the water rising, and end up getting cut off. This is also because they are looking to see what others are doing (the source also of the 'bystander effect' at accident scenes where nobody helps). They are assessing whether to respond. Broadly speaking if a warning is sounded people ask themselves

- is it for real/genuine?

- will it affect me?

- is it immediate?

You can see this behaviour every time a fire alarm sounds. Is it a test ? Does it apply to our office/ room/ lab ? What's everyone else doing ?

Apply this to 'artificial' alarms as in the case of campaigns and we have an obvious problem. We can signal that *we* think this is an emergency but is it for real? Is it genuine (decided for example by reference to trusted sources, which vary)? There are plenty of potential sources of climate scepticism [8].   Will it affect those hearing or seeing the 'message'? Is it immediate? If it fails two out of three of those tests then the conventional emergency frame probably will not work.

Campaigners attempting to use the 'emergency' frame need to anticipate what the response may be. Loreti and Peek point out that it is a myth, even with the much more formulaic nuclear hazard warnings, that 'people take protective action immediately after the first warning'. They write:

'People simply do not take action in response to warning messages as soon as they hear the first warning. Instead, people seek more information about the impending hazard and appropriate responses from those they know personally, from the newsmedia, and from authorities. People call friends, relatives, and neighbors to find out what they plan to do, and they also turn on the radio and television to get more information. Unless there is a clear explanation of the need for an immediate response, they might wait for a second, third, or fourth official warning before responding. For this reason, a good warning plan should call for frequent messages in the early stages of emergencies.'

Perhaps therefore campaigners can take solace from the thought that their warning call, their alarum, will be echoed by many others ?   But if reinforcing signs of reality or imminence do not transpire, then they may simply fall victim to the dulling effect of familiarisation. Repeated false alarms or even repeated genuine alarms with no severe personal consequence can reduce the impact of an alarm to close to zero. This is the effect of car alarms in a densely populated urban area. Genuine or not, after a while they evoke little or no response except the purchase of additional domestic sound proofing and a desire to move to 'a better area', not least because they do not apply to your car (no personalisation).

In the run up to Copenhagen therefore, even *repeated* clarion calls to perceive and respond to an emergency will probably run into difficulties. They will mobilise those with a long time horizon, understanding and a concern for global issues and universalist values (some of the Pioneers [9]) but not others - the majority.

To engage and potentially mobilise others, campaigners bent on using the 'emergency' frame, need to supply 'evidences' and 'proofs' that an emergency is real, applicable to the audience and ongoing. Where for example, are the blue flashing lights ? The 'emergency' frame is powerfully embedded one. In the absence of verifying visual or other signals, invoking it it is unlikely to do anything except undermine the credibility of the messenger. Loreti and Peek note that research shows that 'false alarms' do not necessarily have this effect if the *reason* is seen to have been genuine: ie there were good grounds to sound an alarm. Preventing the 'cry wolf' effect therefore depends upon having your alarm-call verified by trusted sources, and even more so by seeing others acting upon it.

Much research also shows that people are, by and large, inclined *not* to change what they are doing. The more campaigners frame their alarm-call as a wake-up to the need to make *huge* changes, the more likely this is to be the response. In other words, the bigger the proposed change, the more uncertainty and possible downsides it involves, and the more effort is implied, the greater the *incentive* to find a way to ignore it. The easiest way of all is to observe that others, especially Significant-Others, are not responding.

Lacking specialist knowledge (not being immersed in 'the issue'), the 'public' are likely to use ambient and media cues to decide their response. In research on fear of crime for example we [10] found that respondents in qualitative research groups who heard police sirens *during* the session cited those as evidence that there *was* a high level of crime in the area. These people started from an existing belief that there was crime to fear.   In other research I've found people citing 'evidences' like 'Antarctic Cod' in a supermarket as evidence that 'globalisation' is a reality. Campaign planners would do better to *create the cues and attach meaning to them*, rather than launch a claim and leave people to find their own cues to decide whether or not to believe it.

Campaign on Consequences

It may well be that the best way of doing this is not by talking about climate change itself but by causing or focusing on *responses* to it which are consistent with an emergency having been recognized: ie *consequences*. These should be put in *terms* which do not signal giving things up or acting altruistically but which resonate with safety-security-identity values, or success (esteem seeking) values. For example:

- steps that should be taken to protect families and individuals: new protective rights

- measures to recover monies from those to blame, for compensation

- changes to planning law to allow new homes to be built outside threatened areas

- payments/rewards to do the right thing (eg rooftop renewables)

- priority rewards eg to electric cars

- a step by step ending of (perceived) frivolous activities that contribute to the problem

- public investment in resilience and climate protection technologies

- first step emergency restrictions by change-leaders: eg the organisers of climate talks turn to telepresence (etc) and stop 90% of their air travel, and the 10:10 Campaign launched by Franny Armstrong, Director of *Age of Stupid* for people to cut their own emissions 10% in 2010(http://www.1010uk.org/). [At least for those aware of its source, this overcomes some of the too big (for me to tackle), too small (my action is insignificant) problem, as you can plausibly imagine that many others are doing it. The question over such a campaign is whether feedback can be achieved to sustain that effect].

Marc Green says of warnings:

'People are most likely to comply when behavioral consequences: have greater magnitude; have lower response requirement; occur immediately after the response; occur with high probability' .

That could serve as a campaign design brief for what to focus on. So for example an alarm call which focused on the need to undertake relatively *small*, real actions in the here and now (which recipients could plainly undertake - 10:10 yes but finite visible actions are better), and which had some sort of *deadline* to avoid a *loss*, and which was verified by seeing *larger actors* doing a bigger version of the

same thing, would be much more likely to evoke a mobilising 'domino' effect than a contestable 'tall and shrill' open-ended call from a minority that "something must be done".

It is hugely advantageous to make the action about a problem/solution which can be readily seen and experienced rather than something like 'climate change' or the 'industrial system' which is a 'cognitive issue' or problem - ie it has to be thought about and can only be thought about (in the case of climate, through science), rather than touched, seen etc.. As Ulrich Beck pointed out in *The Risk Society* [11], such post industrial cognitive 'modernization' risks 'are an incidental problem of modernization in undesirable abundance', and 'the causal nexus produced in risks between actual or potential damaging effects and the system of industrial production opens an almost infinite number of individual explanations'. As a result there is a 'general lack of responsibility. Everyone is cause and effect, and thus the *non*-cause. The causes dribble away into a general amalgam of agents and conditions, reactions and counter-reactions … one can do something and continue doing it without having to take personal responsibility for it'.

Ideally therefore a plan to sound an alarm call should be integrated with a plan for substantive change, such as the launch of a government or commercial scheme to make changes to policy or infrastructure or marketing new products or services. The issue then becomes respond in line, or not. This implies some collaboration between government and or business and campaigners, rather than campaigners seeing their role purely as bashing government and business.

Even in the absence of such parallel action, it will now be better to make the proposed alarm action about solution actions - "we all need to do X because of the urgency/ opportunity" - rather than the state of the climate or its ecological/ environmental manifestations. The article *Sustaining Disbelief* at www.campaignstrategy.org [12] distinguished six forms of climate scepticism, around: existence, detection, attribution, response, feasibility and efficacy (see diagram p 3). In the case of climate change, governments have bought the idea that a political *response* is required, hence the only two useful debates are about the two downstream from there: feasibility and efficacy. Although a debate per se is not what is desirable, it is to some extent inevitable so it is better to anchor it here (eg not flying, decarbonization, use of renewables, town targets), rather than issuing clarion calls about 'climate change' which can easily go back upstream to debates around existence, detection, attribution etc, as those battles are won.

Mileti and Peek point out that social cohesion/ knowing each other (family, community, workplace etc) improves response because people cooperate "one of the better predictors of good communication in an emergency is the quality of interpersonal interactions in normal times". Working with existing networks, and getting their buy in to respond to the call, will therefore obviously be a way of ramifying any alarm-response and making it wide rather than tall and narrow. This is also probably the best way of demonstrating 'breadth of concern' without having to claim it.

[1] all these are explored in How To Win Campaigns and on pages at the website www.campaignstrategy.org, including http://www.campaignstrategy.org/cr12_4.html

[2] see It's The Children Stupid, *Campaign Strategy Newsletter 50* April 2009, http://www.campaignstrategy.org/newsletters/campaignstrategy_newsletter_50.pdf

[3] http://www.campaigncc.org/

[4] http://www.visualexpert.com/Resources/psychwarnings.html

[5] The social psychology of public response to warnings of a nuclear power plant accident
Dennis S. Mileti, Lori Peek, *Journal of Hazardous Materials* 75_2000.181–194

[6] see framing - George Lakoff, *Don't Think Of An Elephant*, Pub Chelsea Green, 2004 and George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, pub Penguin 2008

[7] See Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,* pub Collins, 2007

[8] *Sustaining Disbelief*, http://*www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/***sustaining_disbelief**.pdf

[9] *Who Gives A Stuff About Climate Change and Who's Taking Action?* Chris Rose, Les Higgins and Pat Dade
www.campaignstrategy.org/whogivesastuff.pdf

[10] J Scott pers comm - www.ksbr.co.uk

[11] Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society, pub* Sage 1992, pages 26, 31 and 33

[12] ref 8 op cit