

Getting Traction on the Thinning Ice Road

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From a public relations point of view, climate change is the worst kind of challenge. It is a problem that is creeping, insidious and incremental. The slow build of the issue and its lack of attention-grabbing defining moments makes it a hard sell to the media, and through media to the public. The fact that the impacts are being felt first and worst in the Arctic also militates against making action on climate change a priority.

Climate change does not promote the instant interest of phenomena such as earthquakes or volcanoes. When a volcano spills lava across an inhabited island, or an earthquake tears apart a town, people can see the challenge, and know how to react. The area must be evacuated, people must be provided with shelter, food, and water. Officials and scientists ensure that appropriate caution is exercised in case of a recurrence of the event. While all of this is happening, it is also of compelling interest to people in the region, in the country, and in other parts of the world. The “if it bleeds it leads” philosophy of news gathering and news judgement ensures that people who would never have heard of the unfortunate site of the catastrophe are suddenly interested spectators, and possibly also actors in the drama. They pressure their governments to contribute financial and technical aid to the area in need, and they may also make a personal contribution of cash or goods. Afterwards, things return to normal, the memory of the catastrophe recedes. People build once more on the flanks of the volcano, and resurrect buildings from the rubble of earthquake-flattened towns.

With climate change, it is not possible to rely on a defining moment of catastrophe to galvanize the required action, at least, not until it is too late for the action to be effective. By the time pipelines are rupturing and buildings are falling because the permafrost has liquefied, it will be too late to take action to prevent that from happening. By the time some species of seals have disappeared, and fish populations have plummeted due to disappearing ice and warming waters, it will again be too late to take the action required to prevent those occurrences. I will not make an exhaustive list of probable Arctic impacts of climate change; those can be found elsewhere¹.

The impacts of climate change that are being noted, such as the northward spread of some plants and animals, the later formation of ice, the retreat of glaciers, are all ‘small’ events. These events may be headed toward a catastrophic conclusion, but in such small increments that each incremental change is not inherently newsworthy, and the final catastrophic event implicit in the incremental changes can simply be dismissed as speculation or fear mongering.

The point is simply that the predicted pace of climate change in the Arctic, the predicted impacts, and the mechanisms thought by a majority of climate scientists to be driving that change all add up to continuing effects long after any action has been attempted to halt or diminish the pace of change. Equally as important is that action to diminish or halt the pace of change is delayed or not undertaken at

¹ The report of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, not published at the time of writing this paper, is to be published in the Autumn of 2004.

all, because people do not immediately see the catastrophic impacts.

The process of climate change, as explained by exponents of the greenhouse gas theory, is one of slowly building effects. Even assuming success in reducing the global emissions of those gases, the effects on the climate would continue to build.

Northerners will recognize this as analogous to driving on an ice road. You apply the brakes, but there is no traction. You continue your forward motion, accompanied by unpredictable skids sideways, before an eventual stop.

There have been some attempts made to link climate change with catastrophic events. A devastating heat wave swept across parts of Europe in August 2003. Although the heat wave was felt quite widely across Europe, its biggest impact was in France. A French government report² concluded that more than 14,800 people died because of the excessive heat. A review of media reports³ on the heat wave reveals that many do not make any causal connection between the heat wave and global climate change. Of those articles that do make some link between the two, there is always a disclaimer suggesting that linking any particular weather event to climate change is not scientifically possible. The following excerpt is typical:

“Meteorologists are divided, however, on whether global warming is to blame for this year’s drought and heat wave. ‘It is impossible to link a specific weather event like a drought or a storm to global warming,’ says Dominique Marbouty, head of operations at the European Centre for Medium Term Weather Forecasts in Britain.”⁴

While such a disclaimer may be good science, it is bad public relations. To cast doubt on whether any attention grabbing weather event is in fact linked to climate change undercuts the impact of these events. Despite the seeming (and predicted)⁵ rise in the number

and severity of extreme weather events, when they can be individually shrugged off as simply unrelated, unforeseeable and unstoppable events, then they fail to gather the critical mass necessary to move the public to demand action on climate change.

There is also the danger that the public will confuse a disclaimer about the difficulty of linking specific weather events to climate change with the often-heard disclaimer about the impact of human activities on climate change. Media stories often mention the arguments of the clutch of scientists, activists, and industrial interests that deny that greenhouse gases are affecting climate change⁶. Most members of the public do not understand the scientific underpinnings of climate change, and must therefore take on faith the idea that human activity leads to increased production of greenhouse gases which leads to climate change. If the public conflates one disclaimer, ‘there is no link between greenhouse gases/human activity and climate change’ with another disclaimer ‘there is no proven link between climate change and this weather event’ then the idea of climate change as a threat, or as a threat that is susceptible to action, is further undercut.

A further difficulty in interesting the public in the climate change story is the duration of the issue. In a sensation and novelty-hungry media environment, it is difficult to sustain the allure of a threat that will continue for decades and will require action that will also last decades. There are only so many years that “Arctic Ice Recedes to Lowest Level Ever” can continue to make headlines. The story becomes stale and old without significant new events to drive it. It drops from the front page, to the inside pages, to the ‘news briefs’, and finally out of the media consciousness altogether.

Even the human impacts can fail to resonate with a larger public, if those impacts are being felt by a very few people, living strange and remote lives, in a strange and remote country or part of their own country. These impacts attract an anthropological interest, but do not have the same emotional resonance as impacts being felt by people perceived as belonging to ones own group or tribe.

2 The complete report (in French) may be found at: [http://www.inserm.fr/servcom/servcom.nsf/9eca30f557b488dccc12569b400384ef1/1e4c3585397d860b80256dac004426cc/\\$FILE/rapport%20canicule.pdf](http://www.inserm.fr/servcom/servcom.nsf/9eca30f557b488dccc12569b400384ef1/1e4c3585397d860b80256dac004426cc/$FILE/rapport%20canicule.pdf)

3 A good source for media stories on climate change is <http://www.climateark.org>

4 Peter Ford, Christian Science Monitor, July 24 2003.

5 More information on the predicted increased incidence of extreme weather events may be found

in the reports of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

6 For an example of the arguments made by the greenhouse gas sceptics, see the editorial in the National Post, October 29 2003, by Carleton University professor Tim Patterson.

The picture is not entirely bleak, however; despite all of the challenges inherent in interesting the Canadian public in climate change issues, there has been increasing support for taking action on climate change. An Environics poll conducted in 1997 found that 61% of respondents were in favour of a statement on climate change saying that we should “assume worst, take major action now”, while 32% supported a statement saying “no major action until we know more”. By 2002, 75% of respondent were in favour of immediate action, while 19% still wanted to wait. Those numbers suggest that there is significant support for climate change action now. The question is whether that support can be maintained. I would suggest that creating that support was easier while climate change was still a relatively fresh story. Maintaining the support may be more problematic, for all the reasons I outlined earlier.

Having established the difficulty of interesting the public in the issue of climate change I will now argue for the necessity of accomplishing precisely that goal. As discussed elsewhere in this publication, political horizons differ from threat horizons. Politicians elected to government will typically spend a first year of a four-year mandate attempting to implement campaign promises (or discovering that they cannot do so), the next two years actually governing, and the final year attempting to get re-elected. Threats must be immediate to attract the attention of people focused on the next two years. But it is not simply enough to blame politicians. They are just reflecting realities. If they were to spend billions of dollars of public money on what is not perceived by the voting public to be a threat, then they would be voted out of office. More opportunistic politicians would take their place, and reverse or slash the spending.

What is needed is not education of politicians. Despite their detractors, many of them are farsighted, intelligent people, or at the very least are provided with farsighted intelligent assistants. They know what the problem is, and they feel powerless to fix it because of the magnitude of the problem, and the magnitude of the expenditure of public money required to fix it when there are still a plethora of other problems clamouring for that same public money. Healthcare, the economy, employment, and education are issues that recent polling identifies as top of mind for Canadians. Environment comes further down the list, and even when it is identified as a priority, people are more concerned about local water and air

quality, than they are about ice shelves splitting or skinny polar bears.

It is therefore incumbent on the scientists, NGOs, bureaucrats, and assorted others concerned about climate change to create the public environment that would be supportive of continuing government action to mitigate the effects of climate change. This means overcoming the inherent difficulties of selling the story of climate change to the bulk of our fellow citizens.

To do so will require first of all a sustained effort. The story must be told over and over until it becomes ingrained in the public consciousness. One successful round of media coverage does not mean the battle is won. The sustained effort will cost money. It will require the continuing efforts of communications specialists to sell the story to the media, and to come up with their own vehicles for reaching out to people directly with climate change messages.

To ensure that the story remains in media will require creative thinking about how to ‘sell’ the story. It cannot be successfully sold over the long term as a story of Arctic impacts. Although the Arctic and its peoples engender some interest because of their remoteness from the experience of most other citizens, it is that very remoteness that undercuts the impacts of the story. As fond as people are of the Arctic, it is simply too far away for them to worry about seriously. These climate change impacts in the Arctic are after all taking place thousands of kilometres away from major population centres.

Messages about climate change must hit people where they live. This is not just about the Arctic, this is about your back yard. This is about the water shortage that has hit your city, so that back yard, and the lawn you treasure, have turned brown. This is about the northward creep of tropical diseases, so you don’t even feel safe sitting in your back yard. This is about increasing catastrophic weather events that hit you no matter where you live.

The links between catastrophic climate events and climate change must be made. This is not an argument for a less scrupulous approach from scientists. It is that scrupulousness that bolsters their integrity as spokespersons. They can, however, balance their messages. If they feel bound to say that the evidence suggests that it is difficult to link any given catastrophic weather event to climate change, then that

must be immediately followed by the message that such events do seem to be increasing, and there is evidence that the increase generally could be linked to climate change.

Despite the difficulties of selling the climate change story, it can be done, and must be done

We are still speeding down the ice road toward the thinning ice, as some in the car remain to be convinced that applying brakes is necessary. We need to think creatively, and effectively sell the stories of climate change so that everyone in the car agrees that it's time to hit the brakes.

if we are to expect sustained political action.