

## Special Thematic Section on "Societal Change"

# The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change

Catherine Happer<sup>\*a</sup>, Greg Philo<sup>a</sup>

[a] Glasgow University Media Group, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom.

### Abstract

The media play a central role in informing the public about what happens in the world, particularly in those areas in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience. This article examines the impact the media has in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. Drawing on findings from a range of empirical studies, we look at the impact of media coverage in areas such as disability, climate change and economic development. Findings across these areas show the way in which the media shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects. For example, in our work on disability we showed the relationship between negative media coverage of people on disability benefit and a hardening of attitudes towards them. Further, we found that the media also severely limit the information with which audiences understand these issues and that alternative solutions to political problems are effectively removed from public debate. We found other evidence of the way in which media coverage can operate to limit understanding of possibilities of social change. In our study of news reporting of climate change, we traced the way that the media have constructed uncertainty around the issue and how this has led to disengagement in relation to possible changes in personal behaviours. Finally, we discuss the implications for communications and policy and how both the traditional and new media might help in the development of better informed public debate.

**Keywords:** media, social change, policy, climate change, disability, economy

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\*Corresponding author at: Glasgow University Media Group, Adam Smith Building, Bute Gardens, Glasgow G12 8RT, United Kingdom. E-mail: Catherine.Happer@glasgow.ac.uk



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The media – television, the press and online – play a central role in communicating to the public what happens in the world. In those cases in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience of what is happening, they become particularly reliant upon the media to inform them. That is not to say that the media simply tell us *what* to think – people do not absorb media messages uncritically (Philo, 2008; Philo, Miller, & Happer, in press). But they are key to the setting of agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects, which operates to limit the range of arguments and perspectives that inform public debate. Drawing on a multi-dimensional model of the communications process, this article examines the role of the media in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. We look at this both at the governmental level, in terms of change through policy action, and at the level of the individual, through commitments to behavioural change. Through

discussions of findings from a range of empirical studies, we illustrate the ways in which the media shape public debate and input into changes in the pattern of beliefs. The conditions under which people accept or reject a message when they are aware of a range of alternatives are fundamental to this process, and are discussed in depth. We then discuss the ways in which such attitudinal shifts facilitate changes at the level of policy. Finally, we examine the way in which audience beliefs and understandings relate to changes in commitments to alter individual behaviours in their intersection with structural support – and the impact of such changes for wider social change.

## Research Context

The advent of digital media has shown that the world is made up of a mass of circulating, disjointed, and often contradictory information. An effective flow of information between the various distinct groups in the public sphere has historically been made possible by the mass media, which systematically edit and interpret the mass of information, making some sense of the world for audiences. As certain knowledges have been promoted over others, they have effectively been given the privileged status of being authoritative and, in some cases, truthful (Fairclough, 2003; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Van Dijk, 1998).

In terms of shaping content, we argue that a number of privileged groups contribute to the production of media accounts, including social and political institutions and other interest groups such as lobbyists and the public relations industry (Miller & Dinan, 2000, 2009). These different groups intersect to shape the issues open to discussion, but the outcome can also severely limit the information to which audiences have access. The media can effectively remove issues from public discussion. The analysis of media content – of what we are told and not told – is therefore a prime concern. But the relationship of media content to audiences is not singular or one-way. Policy-makers, for example, can both feed information into the range of media, and also attempt to anticipate audience response to the manner in which policy is shaped and presented. In addition, they anticipate the way in which their words will be ‘mediated’ and reproduced in various media outlets. The key point is therefore that all of the elements involved in the communications circuit intersect and are dynamic. Whilst in past research each element (e.g. content or effects of media) has often been examined separately, we explain here why it is important to analyse the inter-relations of each of these different components in any discussion of the media’s role in social change. We begin with media content.

## Methods: Content Analysis

Our approach is based on the assumption that in any controversial area there will be competing ways of explaining events and their history. These often relate to different political positions and can be seen as ideological if they relate to the legitimation of ways of understanding that are connected to social interests. In this way, ideology (meaning an interest-linked perspective) and the struggle for legitimacy by groups go hand in hand.

Our method begins by setting out the range of available arguments in public discourse on a specific subject. We then analyse the news texts to establish which of these appear and how they do so in the flow of news programming and press coverage. Some may be referenced only occasionally or in passing while others occupy a much more dominant position, being highlighted in news headlines or in interview questions or editorials. In the case of media

coverage of migration, some arguments and the assumptions that they contain – for example, that a ‘large number’ of migrants constitute a ‘threat’ – may underpin the structure of specific news stories. The story is organised around this way of understanding migration, and the different elements of the story such as interviewees, the information quoted, the selection of images and editorial comment, all work to elaborate and legitimise it as a key theme. In past research we have shown, using this method, that news accounts can and do operate to establish specific ways of understanding (Briant, Philo, & Watson, 2011; Philo, 1996; Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011).

News may appear as a sometimes chaotic flow of information and debate but it is also underpinned by key assumptions about social relationships and how they are to be understood. At the heart of these are beliefs about motivations, cause and effect, responsibility and consequence. So a newspaper report on people seeking asylum might make assumptions on each of these. The ‘real’ motive for people coming might be posited as them seeking a better life or economic advantage. Britain is seen as a ‘soft touch’ for its benefit system, with inadequate laws or administrative structures, and the effect is an uncontrolled ‘flood’. The responsibility is with politicians for failing to stop it and the consequences are that great burdens are placed on British society. There are many flaws and false assumptions in such a chain of understanding. But a central part of our work and our development of new methods has been to show how such key thematic elements and the explanations which they embody can be abstracted from news texts and shown to impact upon audience understanding (Philo, 1990; Philo & Berry, 2011; Philo, Briant, & Donald, *in press*).

In our content analyses we break down the text to identify the major subject areas which are pursued in the news, and then examine the explanatory frameworks which underpin them. This qualitative approach involves detailed analysis of key explanatory themes in headlines and the text of news programmes and newspaper articles. We examine the preference given to some arguments in that they are highlighted by journalists or are repeatedly used or referred to across news reports. So, for example, in our work on Israel and Palestine (Philo & Berry, 2011), we found that in a content study of 89 news bulletins, there were only 17 lines of text (from transcribed bulletins) relating to the history of the conflict. When journalists used the word ‘occupied’, there was no explanation that the Israelis are involved in a military occupation. This led some viewers to believe that the Palestinians were the ‘occupiers’, since they understood the word only to mean that people were on the land. Further, while there was extensive coverage of the violence, there was very little analysis of the nature and causes. The practical effect was to remove the rationale for Palestinian action. Much of the news implicitly assumed the status quo – as if trouble and violence ‘started’ with the Palestinians launching an attack to which the Israelis ‘responded’. This study showed the way in which the Palestinian perspectives were effectively marginalised in the debate, and the Israeli perspectives promoted.

In some studies we make a quantitative assessment of the presence of such themes across news reporting by counting the use of specific phrases and meaningful terms. On this basis we are able to give an account of the exact language used to develop specific themes and the manner in which the dominance of some was established. This is then cross-related to our audience research by a process of asking focus group members to write headlines on the subject in question. We have used this approach in a number of studies and typically participants are able to reproduce spontaneously from memory the key themes which we have established as present in media accounts (Briant *et al.*, 2011; Philo, 1990; Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011). In the next section, we look specifically at media content.

## The Shaping of Media Content

The media response to the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath illustrates the way in which competing ideologies battle for legitimacy. The key instigator to the crisis was that global banks had lent huge sums of money to inflated property markets, mainly in the USA but also in the UK and other parts of Europe. These loans were often given to people and institutions that would not be able to repay them. It has been argued that the pursuit of profit, and disproportionate bonuses, meant that the deals were being pushed through, and risks ignored. As Elliot and Atkinson (2008) put it:

*In January (2008), panellists at the World Economic Forum in Davos were asked how the big banks of North America and Europe had failed to spot the potential losses from sub-prime lending. The one word answer from a group that included the chairman of Lloyds, London... was 'greed.' As one participant put it: 'Those running the big banks didn't have the first idea what their dealers were up to, but didn't care because the profits were so high. (p. 11)*

In the UK, the Labour party would have, in the past, been the political party most likely to criticise such a development and the behaviour that caused it. For most of the twentieth century the Labour party was socially democratic and believed that free market profiteering should be curbed, that the people as a collective should own key sectors of industry and commerce and the rights of working people should be defended. However, after election defeats to the Conservatives in 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992, the Labour party rethought its brand and approach. As a result the party moved away from its traditional policies and sought to show that it was a 'safe' custodian of the de-regulated free market economy. In doing so it adopted a very supportive policy towards the financial sector (Philo, 1995). New Labour was elected to power in 1997 on the slogan 'Things can only get better', which was a reference to the perceived decline in public services and of corruption and sleaze in public life. New Labour would have a bigger safety net for the poor and spend more on health and the public sector. But nonetheless its new leader, Tony Blair, was seen as continuing Thatcher's key economic policies, including deregulation of the City of London and the banking system.

Under Blair and his chancellor Gordon Brown (later British Prime Minister) the deregulation of the banks not only continued but was extended. The reasons for Labour's supportive relationship with the finance industry were not simply electoral. The finance sector, based in London, is very powerful and can impose pressures on governments with the often repeated argument that it can be relatively mobile in response to less than favourable conditions within any nation state. Will Hutton, British journalist and former Chief Executive of the Work Foundation, has argued that as London began to rise in the league tables of international finance, 'New York and London were in an unseemly race to regulate less' (Hutton, 2008, p. 2). The City of London exerts substantial political power, perhaps more so than any other non-governmental sector, and even well-intentioned governments can be extremely nervous of very wealthy individuals and institutions that can move huge sums of money in and out of economies. As Maurice Glasman of London Metropolitan University commented on Channel 4's *Dispatches*:

*The city of London is an extremely powerful institution, perhaps the most effective lobbyist, I think, in history. It's a city government that represents one interest alone, which is the financial interest. (14<sup>th</sup> June 2010)*

But what was the impact of these social, political and commercial relationships on media coverage of the banking crisis? The bulk of the British press is privately owned and the free market and deregulation has consistently been

supported by the Murdoch-owned press (including *The Sun* and *The Times*) as well as the conservative-leaning *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. *The Daily Mirror* is traditionally more left-wing, but also supportive of the Labour party. Whilst we also have to make the qualification that these are commercial businesses and have to connect with audiences in order to generate sales, it is the case that the majority of the mainstream press were pre-disposed to promote policies on the neo-liberal end of the spectrum.

The case is more complex with the British public service broadcaster, the BBC, which is also a key supplier of public information through its television – and less so online – services. The range of political arguments which appear on the BBC are shaped by its own definition of democracy. The basis for this is that the population vote for elected representatives and the BBC then features these representatives on television and radio and what they say constitutes the limits of democratic debate. In other words, TV debate is mostly limited to the views of the three main parties in Britain, the Conservative party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats. But since all of these have become wedded to free market philosophy, the discussion of alternatives to this approach becomes very sparse. An added dimension is that in the most powerful unelected groups, such as the bankers themselves and other members of the financial class, are likely to have an immediate access to the BBC and other media outlets, because they are treated as ‘experts’ and important decision makers. Therefore, across the majority of the media the bankers, private enterprise and high profits were celebrated. The economy appeared to be booming, house prices rose and the New Labour government had increased tax revenues to spend on health and education.

The result of these factors is that when the crash occurred, those who appeared in the mainstream media to discuss solutions tended to be those who are most supportive of – or drawn from – the system which created the problems. The British mainstream press did reflect the anger felt by its readers in response to the crash in 2008, many of whom had pensions and savings which were potentially threatened. *The Daily Mail* roared from its front page:

**GREED THAT FUELLED A CRASH** (14th October 2008)

*The Sun*'s headline was more succinct:

**SCUMBAG MILLIONAIRES**

**Shamed Banked Bosses ‘Sorry’ For Crisis** (11th February 2009)

But amidst the fury, there are no demands here for alternative solutions, such as taking back the bonuses through a wealth tax, or taking the bulk of the financial sector into public ownership. This exclusion of debate about radical alternatives to cuts, such as taxing the bankers or other wealthy groups, is entirely irrespective of the potential popularity of these policies. As a test we developed a proposal to pay off the British national debt by having a one-off tax on the wealthiest 10% of the population. This group has private wealth of £4trillion (mainly in property and pensions). A tax of one fifth of this amount would have paid off the national debt which was around £800billion. This would reduce the deficit because government spending includes interest paid on the debt and because the proposal would avoid the cuts. Without these, there would be less unemployment and therefore more tax revenue.

The Glasgow University Media Group commissioned a *YouGov* poll on this which found that 74% of the UK population would be in favour of this approach. *The Guardian* covered the proposal (Philo, 2010) and the BBC featured it in marginal programmes such as *The Jeremy Vine Show* on Radio 2 (14th September 2010) and the *Lunchtime Daily Politics* on BBC 2 (15th September 2010). Such programmes often seek out what they see as extreme debate. On the *Daily Politics*, the proposal was introduced by the presenter as being from ‘cloud cuckoo land.’

These more radical solutions lay outside the media debate amongst those who were asked to contribute. In essence, the message was that the bankers were indeed at fault but there is no alternative. As *The Sun* explains in this editorial:

*Many will ask if it is right that tax payers are forced to subsidise irresponsible borrowers and greedy banks. But what was the alternative? Neither America nor Britain could stand by and watch their economies disintegrate. (The Sun, 20th September 2008)*

The argument is then taken further by David Cameron who, as Prime Minister, argued that we must stop attacking the bankers. In the *Daily Telegraph* he was reported as saying:

*David Cameron: stop seeking vengeance on bankers  
Voters must stop seeking to “take revenge” on banks and accept they are vital to economic recovery,  
David Cameron said yesterday. (The Daily Telegraph, 15th January 2011)*

In the face of such structures of power, the media acts more as a release for frustration and discontent rather than a forum to explore potential alternatives. No transformation of the economy or the banking system is considered viable and the solution became simply to cut public spending – a key priority of the UK coalition government elected in 2010. The central justification for this was that welfare spending was too high. A receptive popular media highlighted stories of ‘scroungers’ and ‘shirkers’, although the bulk of welfare cuts is in fact directed at the elderly and those in low-paid work. The banking crash and the intrinsic problems of the economic systems were replaced in the public agenda with other issues allegedly requiring urgent solutions – and groups other than the bankers being the target of political action (Briant et al., 2011; Philo, Miller, & Happer, in press).

## The Impact of Media Content on Public Belief and Attitudes

We have shown the way in which public debate is shaped by ideological battles relating to powerful groups in society, but in what way does this highlighting of ‘preferred’ views and explanations influence audience understanding? A key aspect of our method has also been to study media content and processes of audience reception simultaneously, in order to understand the way in which audiences negotiate their beliefs and attitudes in response to media messages. These messages are not received uniformly by all audiences, and the level of influence that they have varies greatly. We have been interested in exploring the key factors in the capacity of audiences to accept or reject messages, and the consequences of this for the shaping of public understanding.

In 2011 the Glasgow University Media Group undertook a study of UK news coverage and attitudes and beliefs about disability and disabled people (Briant et al., 2011). This involved, firstly, a content analysis across comparable periods in 2004-05 and 2010-11, designed to track changes in style, content or volume across media coverage of policy change relating to disability benefits and, in particular, to highlight media responses to the recent cuts made by the UK coalition government. This work was complemented by an audience reception study to assess the way in which reporting was being negotiated by members of the public in terms of beliefs, perceptions and attitudes, and further to explore the key trends highlighted in the content study.

The analysis showed that, across the sample periods, there had not only been a significant increase in the reporting of disability in the print media, but this increase had been accompanied by a shift in the way that disability was being reported. The subject had become more politicised and there had been a reduction in the proportion of

articles which described disabled people in sympathetic terms, whilst those focusing on disability benefit and fraud had grown. In our accompanying audience studies, we found that audience members' ideas on what constituted a typical newspaper story on disability coincided with the findings of our content analysis, with benefit fraud being a key theme identified. They were also very clear on what the intended message was – but there were disagreements over whether it was believed. When we asked the groups to consider what the percentage of people who were fraudulently claiming disability benefits was the responses varied from 'about 10%' right up to 70%. The official figure is closer to 0.5% (DWP, 2013). When asked to justify where they got their figures from respondents talked about both newspaper articles (for example the informant above who estimated fraud to be at 70% cited an article in the *Daily Express*) but also referred to their own experiences, with almost all claiming that they knew people who were fraudulently claiming one form of disability benefit or another. However, as these comments suggest, the assumption of its widespread nature was not always related to a certainty about those actually claiming fraudulently, but a perception supported by the belief that the system is very easily manipulated:

*Speaker 1:* It's really easy to fake symptoms. Or even bad backs.

*Speaker 2:* That's the biggest one isn't it, bad back?

*Speaker 3:* And if you want to defraud then ... people know don't they, they know what to say and how to get round the system, so there's a big increase in people knowing how to defraud the system.

Further, there was a great deal of resentment directed at the large numbers of people believed to be fraudulently claiming benefit:

*Speaker 1:* Makes you angry for people who work full time and there are loads of people who are scamming it... I mean when you've been scrimping and scrapping and yer man's not too well, you know what I mean?

*Speaker 2:* They get the best of everything... Because they're getting their rent paid... They've learned the system. You know there are people getting Chinese deliveries every night and you can't afford it.

In this sense there was evidence that the media coverage, combined with the processes of logic (that the system was easy to defraud and therefore it was likely that people would do it), and claims of knowledge about specific cases resulted in the development of beliefs about disability and fraud. On the other hand, disabled people themselves expressed significant anger at some of the press reporting and at the accusations linking disabled people with scrounging and fraudulent claims. For some of these, the issue of disabled people not receiving the level of support they required was a bigger issue than fraud. In these cases, disabled people used their direct experience to reject the news message.

Direct experience was therefore a substantial factor in the negotiation of the media message. The power of the media message tended to be heightened in those cases in which there was no direct experience or other knowledge of an issue, and conversely to decrease when people had direct experience. In the disability study the large majority of those we spoke to had some experience of disability either through a close family member or close friends, many of whom had tried to get benefits and had failed. One participant, for example, talked about how hard it had been for her mother to get any benefits and another described the difficulties her partner had faced in trying to get access to the services he required. But this did not lead to a simple rejection of the of the media message – the power of the media message could remain and in fact, we found that audience members often held the two potentially competing beliefs at the one time – recognising the widespread and genuine hardships of disability but also believing that huge numbers were not deserving of benefits.

In a similar way, when we studied TV and press reporting of mental illness, we found that it focussed on violent incidents. People who worked in the area of mental health and who had professional experience tended to discount this media view and highlight that only a tiny minority of those with mental health issues were potentially violent. Yet there were also examples in which the fear generated by media coverage overwhelmed direct experience. In the following case a young woman described how she had worked alongside elderly people in a hospital. There people were in no way dangerous or violent yet she was afraid of them because of what she had seen on television:

*The actual people I met weren't violent – that I think they are violent, that comes from television, from plays and things. That's the strange thing, the people were mainly geriatric – it wasn't the people you hear of on television. Not all of them were old, some of them were younger. None of them were violent – but I remember being scared of them, because it was a mental hospital – it's not a very good attitude to have but it is the way things come across on TV, and films – you know, mental axe, murderers and plays and things – the people I met weren't like that, but that is what I associate them with (Philo, 1996, p. 104).*

Across these studies, thus, we found that a number of factors including direct experience, knowledge from other sources, logic and the generation of fear or anger contributed to the degree to which audiences accepted or rejected the media message. A consistent theme is that where there is a lack of alternatives presented, the message is much less likely to be rejected.

Overall, the mainstream media in the UK have given very little space to views beyond those offered by the main political parties. In relation to the financial crisis, this has reduced the range of responses to a choice between having cuts now, as offered by the current coalition government, or having them later, as offered by the Labour party. This closing down of options may be seen to have affected public understanding of the necessity of the cuts, with successive polls showing that the majority support them, including those on welfare (ICM/Sunday Telegraph, 2012; YouGov, 2012). A YouGov poll from 2010 (YouGov/ITN, 2010), the period in which our disability research was conducted, found that more than two thirds of the population 'supported more stringent testing of people claiming disability living allowance'. Whilst social changes at the level of the current transformation of the welfare system do not *require* public support, they are certainly facilitated by it, and just as crucially by the elimination of active opposition. This is primarily because governments constantly strive for electoral support. In this sense the dual role of media coverage in generating public anger combined with the presentation of benefits cuts as an inevitable 'solution' to the economic crisis has made way for these quite radical social changes to be pushed through by limiting the potential for public resistance. While the interplay of public opinion, policy implementation, and social change is complex, the media can often play a legitimising role. In the next section, which looks at audience reception of media accounts of climate change, we introduce a further element to our analysis of media and social change: that of the key factors which influence individual and collective behaviour.

## Media Accounts and Changing Public Attitudes and Behaviours

In 2011 the Glasgow University Media Group conducted a major research project examining the impact of media coverage of climate change on audience understanding and engagement with climate change. The climate policy objectives of the current coalition government in the UK revolve around de-carbonisation – a process which is enshrined in law through the 2008 Climate Change Act. But climate change is distinctive from other policy issues, such as, for example, the economic policies or welfare cuts already discussed, in that their success or failure lies to a significant degree with public participation, which goes way beyond attitudinal support of the policies. Patterns

in attitudes and belief need to be accompanied by the adoption of new behavioural patterns – and it is in these that social change will ultimately take place.

There are a range of factors which have contributed to the shape of current reporting of climate change, which has been routinely criticised for its lack of clarity on the basic scientific arguments. Much has been written about the way in which journalistic norms, primarily the aim of ‘balanced’ reporting, have shaped climate change as an issue of uncertainty (Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 2007). But the aim of journalistic balance – combined with an increasing need for news to sensationalise, often achieved via the construction of conflict – has also supported the sceptics’ aims and methods. There is evidence that there are powerful and well-resourced bodies operating to systematically undermine accurate media reporting in this area as part of the wider spread of climate scepticism. In February 2013, it was revealed by *The Guardian* that an anti-renewables media campaign was funded by secretive trusts linked to wealthy US and UK business people (Goldenberg, 2013). The trusts have financed 102 organisations which either dismiss climate science or downplay the need to take action. They have invested millions of dollars over the past decade in contrarian think tanks and activists to spread scepticism, and increasingly a part of this is the anti-renewables rhetoric. *Guardian* journalist George Monbiot noted that one of the British groups, The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), has had representatives appear on the BBC 10 times (Monbiot, 2013). The implication of the BBC in this promotion of organised sceptic views shows the effectiveness of the lobby groups’ approach. The prominence of their representatives has meant that even the national public service broadcaster has turned to them in their sourcing of ‘experts’ for such battles – rather than genuine scientists and experts such as engineers in the case of energy. As a result news reporting is increasingly shaped by this construction of polarisation and conflict, with the media, rather than the scientists, or even the politicians, setting the terms of the debate, meaning that the key scientific arguments upon which policy is based are constantly undermined. In addition to the polarised nature of coverage, since 2010 an equal if not greater problem is that the level of global and national media coverage has suffered a sharp decline (Fischer, 2011), reflecting a re-ordering of the political priorities since the economic crash. This in turn affects media priorities, since politicians have a key role in setting agendas and highlighting issues for discussion.

In our study we set out to investigate not only the factors which contributed to audience members’ acceptance or rejection of the media message, but also to examine the conditions under which new information might lead to changes in behaviour (Happer, Philo, & Froggatt, 2012). In previous work, we have shown the conditions under which new information is produced. For example, in our work on HIV/AIDS (Kitzinger 1990, 1993; Miller, 1998), we analysed the differing effects of the UK Conservative government’s campaign on changes in condom use and sexual behaviour. The link between smoking and cancer has also clearly produced substantial behavioural change. But there are also examples in which new information does not produce such changes. Our aim was to establish why new messages vary in their effects, and to identify the possible triggers for potential behavioural change.

With this aim we developed methods which involved immersing our participants in a new information environment which we constructed. We conducted a series of focus groups across the UK, recruited on normal socio-demographic criteria. In these sessions, we began by measuring people’s attitudes and beliefs on the issue of climate change and then exposed them to new information in the form of television, radio, and newspaper reports showing possible future events that illustrated the potential consequences of climate change. All of the materials represented in differing forms and from differing perspectives three future scenarios which were developed through detailed research and consultation with experts in the related scientific field. The first scenario documented a mass flood in Bangladesh that leads to loss of land and the forced migration of millions of the population. Migrants initially

journeyed to India but were turned away by border control agents and are eventually picked up in the Bay of Bengal by ferries chartered by the international community. Many disperse to areas in Europe and it is reported that 150,000 are due to port in the UK city of Southampton where protestors are demonstrating against their arrival. The second scenario focused on the local effects of climate change. Following a series of severe, nationwide floods Glasgow suffers the UK's worst ever flood disaster. The flood forces thousands from their homes and businesses and the report included predictions about the long-term implications for the Scottish economy.

We set out initially to investigate the way in which audiences negotiate the coverage – a key element of this was the way in which they assess the credibility of sources and attribute trust. Of the groups mentioned, scientists and other experts were rated very highly – it was thought that information 'straight from the horse's mouth' was most likely to be accurate. However, whilst the scientists themselves were trusted, the science itself was seen to be largely theoretical rather than evidence-based and therefore difficult to prove, as this exchange shows:

*Facilitator:* So did you have any doubt about the science of it then? If you read National Geographic, was it possible to predict these things at all?

*Female speaker:* I don't think it's ever possible, no.

*Facilitator:* You don't think it's ever possible to predict these things?

*Female speaker:* They can't predict the weather tomorrow so how can they predict that sort of thing. You read into it what you want.

*Facilitator:* So you think the scientific predictions are a bit dodgy?

*Male speaker:* Well, they do contradict each other.

*Female speaker:* One week it's one thing, one week it's another. It just swaps about. (High-income group, Crowborough)

There was a sense that the evidence could be easily manipulated to present different arguments, and promote different agendas. One of the groups thought to be engaged in presenting agenda-led information were the politicians – this related to not only the fact that politicians were one of the main groups speaking on the issue (much more than the scientists themselves) but that public trust in them was very low. This left audiences with no clear idea of who to believe on this subject, and combined with a strong feeling of general powerlessness about this as well as other issues in public life. In spite of general sympathy towards the issue and a recognition of its importance, the overall picture of current audience reception was therefore one of confusion, cynicism and distrust about public communications.

On the subject of changing individual behaviours, beyond the adoption of recycling, most people had not made conscious changes due to their concerns about climate change. Again this was in spite of a strong awareness of the importance of doing so. Whilst cost and convenience were cited as reasons for not making changes, the sense of powerlessness, that individuals cannot make a difference and that, at the level of policy, those in charge could not be trusted to make decisions for the greater good, also played a role in this disengagement. To compound this the current dip in media attention to the subject was also found to be having an impact – overwhelmingly people felt it was less a pressing subject than it had been in the past, and, for most, the economic recovery was a greater priority, with ethical concerns characterised as a luxury for more prosperous times.

Having established their views and levels of engagement to climate change, we then introduced the new information in the form of our constructed television reports and newspaper articles. The Bangladesh refugee story had a particularly strong impact. The main reason for the greater concern and urgency was that this scenario tapped

into existing worries about issues such as immigration, and the scarcity of resources such as employment and housing. The reports highlighted to participants the potential personal consequences of climate change and substantially enhanced concern. Most significantly, audience members no longer saw climate change as a theoretical and 'woolly' issue but one which might have real and serious consequences for themselves and their communities:

*Speaker 1:* I just think it's heart-breaking.

*Speaker 2:* How do you think we're going to cope with all that? These hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands of people that's going to come to Britain?

*Speaker 3:* It's up to the government to cope.

*Speaker 2:* Well, it's not really just up to the government.

*Speaker 1:* That's my opinion.

*Speaker 2:* Where is, well, what you mean then is see in ten years' time look how much things have changed in Britain in the last say ten years right, I'll even shorten it, five years, right now even the way it works in this university people's hours are cut, people are forced to take early redundancy and everything, everything that's happened this last five years is through this now see in another ten years' time see as long as we keep doing this and nobody else is it's all going to come to Britain.

Once they saw that the science is solidly based, and the potential consequences are real and severe, they saw more clearly that action has to be taken. The aims of taking action – as well as the risks of not doing so – became clear.

To assess the extent of attitudinal change we asked participants to state how important climate change was to them on a scale of 1 to 10 both before the new information and after the new information was introduced. About two thirds (68%) of participants increased the rating across the morning – from 13 to 25 '10's, nearly doubling of the number giving it the top rating. This is a substantial increase, and provides evidence of genuine attitudinal change in response to the scenarios. It reflects the potential for new information to impact on attitudes in the short-term. However, when we asked about the impact of this increased concern upon their position on ethical behaviours, we found a marked lack of commitment to behavioural change. Again, most people saw the importance of behavioural change, but the original reasons for disengagement were widely repeated: that individuals cannot make a difference, changes have to be made at the level of government (who are currently not trusted) and that they were not sure what more could be done once issues of cost and convenience were considered. The longitudinal findings – which were based on follow-up interviews with half the original sample six months later – confirmed that the majority had not made changes to their behaviour.

The above evidence is consistent with the 'value-action gap' (Blake, 1999), in that in spite of beliefs in the need for action on climate change, and the increased concern generated by the materials in the short term, the majority of interviewees had not changed their behaviour in the six months since the first wave of research. The issue of structural barriers offered some explanation for this failure of attitudes to translate into behaviours and some interviewees' major reason for inaction was their belief that they had reached the limits of what they could practically achieve. But media accounts – and the related conflicts in understanding – also played a role. The sense of not knowing who or what to trust in terms of the most effective course of action, rooted in the proliferation of media opinions and arguments, continued to be cited as a significant barrier to action. Also important was the belief that climate change was no longer a priority issue. The fieldwork coincided with a period of very low media attention (Fischer, 2013), and the impact of that on audiences' levels of concern and prioritisation was evident in both waves of research.

In spite of these barriers, however, in our longer-term research we did actually find a sizable minority who changed their behaviour in response to the information that they received. These tended to be people who found their opinions strengthened by the experience of taking part in the focus groups rather than radically altered, suggesting that a key factor is an existing openness to behave more 'ethically'. It was notable that those who had made the greatest changes included participants for whom at least one of the scenarios had a considerable impact. An Asian bakery owner, for example, believed that the Bangladesh scenario threatened her security and that of her own community and the concern it generated had become deep-rooted in the preceding six months.

Further, there was, in the majority of groups, a clear sense that decisive action was important and would have to be taken. There was an acceptance, for example, that air travel might have to be curbed or made more expensive. Such action would have to be initiated at government level. It seems likely that if a clear lead was given then the public would, however grudgingly, accept it. This actually reflects the history of public acceptance of legislation on issues such as wearing seat belts in cars or motor cycle crash helmets, but this does require organised collective action. In our study, individual decisions to change were not seen as especially effective. Commitments to behavioural change quickly evaporate if it is not felt that the broader support and participation is there. In the longer term, a willingness to engage with these issues can quickly translate into increased frustration if good intentions are unrealisable due to a lack of opportunity – for example, it is difficult to commit to cycling to work every day, without the protection of a network of cycle lanes.

### **The Importance of Repeated Exposure to Media Messages**

The longitudinal element of the climate change research also allowed us to look more closely at the role that the media play in the negotiations of beliefs and associated behaviours through the recurrence and reinforcement of particular messages. Across the interviews, we found a relationship between the prior exposure to information, often related to strength of attitude, on the subject and the degree to which the information impacted on beliefs and opinions. Those who had been least exposed to either subject were most open to adjusting their views and conversely those who arrived at the groups with most exposure were least likely to have their opinions changed by the new information. This was the case even if the information they had been exposed to was polarised, or inaccurate. In fact, we found only one group who claimed never to have read or heard anyone deny the science – and everyone in this group accepted the general assumption of anthropogenic climate change. But exposure to a great degree of polarised coverage of the issue often led to very firm opinions of the opposite position: that the science was unclear and inconsistent.

As a consequence, when we revisited half of our sample six months later, in spite of their immediate responses, the majority claimed that the experience of taking part in the group did not change their attitudes or behaviours in relation to climate change in the longer term. Most acknowledged that their earlier concern had waned. Evidently the impact of the information and discussions had not always been sustained during the intervening six months. What did appear to have happened in those months was that participants had become more alert to information about climate change: almost all said they were more likely to read or listen to such information than they had previously (even those who had claimed to be very informed). As they became more alert, the impact of the information presented during the groups was reduced by the coverage encountered in the actual media environment. Whilst it was a period of low media attention to climate change, the attention that was there focused on issues such as the political debate over the impact of investment in green energies on the UK economy, and 'green taxes'

(Hall, 2011; McDermott, 2013); in other words, coverage which further highlighted uncertainty in relation to taking action. The emphasis on uncertainty – which functioned to close down viable behavioural choices – was further enhanced by the continually reinforced construction of society as suffering from low public decency and the associated lack of trust to be attributed to public figures. The wider media environment therefore works against the attitudinal change found in our study, in that the audience engagement and the potential for behavioural change which we introduced was largely not sustained once people were subsequently exposed to more actual media coverage.

## Conclusions

The information that people are given in media accounts can both legitimise the actions of the powerful, and facilitate change at the collective level, but can also limit and shape the behaviours of individuals which are central to wider social change. There is a need to examine the relationship between beliefs about the world and the political conclusions drawn by the public, the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action, and between those conclusions and individual and collective commitments to behavioural change. Our research has shown that the media play a facilitating role – in the easing through of policy action by repetition and reinforcement of media messages, and the absence of proposed alternatives – and also a possible role in shaping behaviour, especially where these are linked to other types of structural support.

The key to both of these lies in the complex process of negotiation in which audiences receive messages involving a range of factors including current and past media accounts, beliefs, knowledge and prior experience, structural barriers and values. These may lead to attitudinal and ultimately behavioural commitment and change, or may inhibit these. In relation to the role of public communications about climate change, for example, there is little point in driving home the message about behavioural change unless there are simple, effective and supported solutions open to people from which they can see the real benefits. But media accounts can play a central role in not only legitimising certain courses of action, but the placing of trust and credibility in particular versions of the possible directions for social policies. They can also be used to insert doubt and confusion into a debate such as climate change, and may reduce commitments to action. The media are in essence a contested space in which the most powerful groups can establish the dominance of specific messages. But, as we have shown, the complexity of the reception process then creates the possibility of variations in attitudinal and behavioural response.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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