

# Helping the Cause ... or Making Enemies? | The Yale Forum on Climate Change & The Media

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*Issue ads and messages from green groups largely seen as being outside of the mainstream differ greatly in terms of impacts they can have on the very message being addressed and, more broadly, on environmentalism and environmental groups generally.*

A September 2011 PBS [documentary](#) focusing on a radical environmental group, the Earth Liberation Front, raises questions about the effectiveness of extremist organizations and their communication efforts. Do they help the cause of environmentalism? Or do they rather risk making new and more enemies?

As with the atmosphere itself, advocates' rhetoric on climate change can overheat, potentially thwarting the very actions and goals those messages are meant to encourage.

## Effective Climate Change Communication

Researchers regularly debate best ways to communicate environmental messages. Some have focused on how the media affect the communication of climate change, analyzing print [advertisements](#), [newspapers](#), [television](#) commercials and programs and other media.

Other researchers cover the topic more broadly, and among [these](#), cautions against appeals to fear are common. Susan Joy Hassol, director of [Climate Communication](#), for instance, firmly [believes](#) that scientists need to bridge the understanding gap between themselves and the public and encourages them to avoid jargon, be very clear, use metaphors, and frame their arguments carefully.

Authors and researchers Susanne Moser and Lisa Dilling champion a clear set of [guidelines](#) they say advocates should follow to communicate effectively without appealing to fear:

- Connect with audience;
- Provide information at beginning;
- Address the concept of "urgency";
- Be persuasive;
- Use credible messengers;
- Use opportunities well;
- Connect with viewer's values and beliefs;
- Create a sense of "uniting and conquering."

On the other hand, Laurentian University professor Philippa Spoel and her colleagues, in a 2009 article in *Technical Communication Quarterly*, [reject](#) the notion of absolutely avoiding fear in environmental issue ads. They argue that apocalyptic narratives can be useful because, rather than creating confusion, they can help focus the audience's attention and thereby strengthen the argument.

Without question, some of the differences arise because certain groups face their own particular

challenges in any given situation. In effect, it's not only important to know one's audience and one's message, but also to "know thyself," that is know the strengths, limitations, and popular perceptions of the messenger sending the message in the first place. "Radical" groups, under this approach, may face far-different communication challenges than groups generally perceived as being "mainstream." In which case, a different set of guidelines may apply.

## **The Challenge of Radical Messaging**

The International Encyclopedia of Communication Online [defines a group as radical](#) if it attempts to change society through the portrayal of opinions, beliefs, and solutions in ways widely opposed by the general public. Depending on one's vantage point, the British environmental groups [Plane Stupid](#), [Earth First!](#), and [Greenpeace](#) may fit this criterion.

An initial challenge such groups may face involves gaining media attention. Communication researcher Kevin DeLuca, writing in *Argumentation & Advocacy*, [examines](#) how groups such as Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation have sought to further their causes by holding "image events," public demonstrations designed to look good in photographs or on television.

Sociologist Christopher Rootes, however, points out that environmental issues, and thus the environmental [movement](#), only infrequently receive major coverage from much of the mass media. As a result, he says, these groups must rely more on paid advertising than on coverage of their highly visual but home-made "image events." Placing radical print advertisements and television and web commercials, Rootes says, has led to criticism on its own; but in many cases the controversies arising from those ads and criticisms of them actually lead to increased visibility for the very issues being highlighted.

With its long, sustained, and highly visible tradition of activism and lobbying and substantial media coverage of those activities, Greenpeace maintains extensive video and photo [collections](#). Greenpeace bases its communication efforts strongly around visuals. In an [interview](#) with DeLuca about the organization's communication choices, Soenke Lorenzen, a German Greenpeace International media analyst, said "Greenpeace remains very successful in conveying complex narratives with engaging, challenging, and iconic images." In the U.S., of course, Greenpeace is well known also for its dramatic confrontations at sea with fishing ships and for its scaling of corporate smoke stacks or similar initiatives.

## **Failed Messages: Exploding Students? Plunging Polar Bears?**

By contrast, two recent advertising campaigns by the groups Plane Stupid and [10:10](#) stand out for the attention they attracted based on the ads themselves and not solely the organizations that initiated them.

Plane Stupid's radical "[Polar Bear](#)" ad shockingly portrays images of polar bears falling from the sky to their deaths in order to parallel with wastes emitted by airplanes and as a result of air travel. The British 10:10 "[No Pressure](#)" commercial, which the organization quickly took off the air as the result of international controversy it generated, uses gruesome imagery showing school children and other individuals being blown-up and bloodied for questioning basic points about human-caused climate change and for their steadfast unwillingness to address the issue.



*School children bloodied for refusing to address climate change concerns.*



*Images of polar bears fallen to their deaths, a symbol of air travel wastes.*

Both of these visually wrenching commercials violated the approaches outlined by Moser and Dilling in excessively focusing on fear and in failing to connect with audience's fundamental and underlying beliefs and values.

The 10:10 commercial creates an unnecessary us/them mindset involving the intended individuals with whom the viewer is meant to personally identify: The viewer ends up sympathizing with the victims, rather than with the global warming cause that is at the heart of the ad. The 10:10 "No Pressure" ad, coming from an organization seen across much of the United Kingdom as being mainstream, risked doing more to offend the audiences it was meant to impress than it did to gain their support and allegiance.

On the other hand, Plane Stupid is widely perceived as a radical or fringe group reaching out to a narrow and specific audience of environmentalists, perhaps helping to explain why its "Polar Bear" advertisement created significantly less controversy in the media. The main downfall of this commercial may revolve around the impracticality of its absolutist plea that the public simply stop using air travel altogether.

### **Greenpeace's Successful Eco Messages?**



Throughout the U.S. Greenpeace is a fairly well known environmental group and one that, while on the more



*Greenpeace's 'Angry Kid' features a child lecturing adults about their excesses.*

Earth is facing today.

activist fringe of the movement generally, seems to get more mainstream media attention than most others, perhaps in part because of its strategic use of advertising. The organization uses a number of strategies and tactics endorsed by Moser and Dilling, focusing primarily on a select audience more open to listening to its arguments.

Two Greenpeace advertisements stand out because of their unusual take on communicating climate change. "[Angry Kid](#)" consists of a young child speaking sternly to adults about their excesses, and "[Alien Invasion](#)" uses comedy to portray the problems

Even though "Angry Kid" is based substantially on fear and creates an us/them confrontation, the Greenpeace ad offsets these negative appeals by using an unconventional messenger and connecting with family values.



*Greenpeace's 'Alien Invasion' uses humor to buttress a sobering message.*

Similarly, Greenpeace jumps into a very pessimistic viewpoint in "Alien Invasion." But it compensates here by using humor, providing a positive outlook in the end, and connecting to daily lives of viewers.

A [commercial](#) by a very mainstream and "establishment" group, The Nature Conservancy, offers a basis for contrasting communication attempts of more radical groups with those of an establishment "up-scale" conservation organization. This advertisement focuses mainly on family values and beliefs, using nostalgia and visual tools to create a sense of unity and love of nature.



*The Nature Conservancy's softer tone ... a loving, homey feeling.*

This Nature Conservancy advertisement obviously differs from the radical exhibits discussed earlier in that it avoids playing on fears and rather establishes a loving, homey feeling. The difference illustrates how more militant groups attempt to grab viewers' attention by using controversial images and scaring them into action, while a more mainstream group tries instead to nudge people in the right direction in the hope that they will further the cause.

### **Weighing Impacts of 'Extreme' Messaging**

Critics may claim that the advertisements only seem effective, that they actually create controversy and problems for the issue, the organization originating them ... or both. Environmental analysts John W. Delicath and Kevin M. DeLuca, for instance, agree that the use of radical messages is at times indirect and disjointed, fueling more debate, argument, and controversy and making the issue being addressed seem even more controversial. They caution that excessive or extensive use of fear and controversial images can be counterproductive, angering people and obscuring the intended message.

Beyond potential adverse impacts on the specific issue that is the focus of the ads lie potential impacts on public perceptions of environmental issues more generally ... or on environmental organizations themselves.

Do groups and messages generally regarded as being over-the-top only complicate attitudes toward, and make things more difficult for, more "serious" environmental organizations? Do controversies surrounding activities of an [Earth Liberation Front](#) redound to the disadvantage of environmentalism generally?

Opposing this argument, Jonathan Lange, author of "Refusal to Compromise: The Case of Earth First!," in 1990 in the *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, argued that the rhetoric and actions of radical groups may not only spread environmental awareness but also help legitimize — or, one might say, provide cover for — non-radical groups' ideas.

In the end, it's a truism that communicating climate change most effectively depends on the specific messenger, the specific message being communicated, and the circumstance at play at a given time.

Different rules will apply in different situations. Fear appeals may be effective in particular instances when combined with the kinds of guidelines outlined by Moser and Dilling, so long as those appeals carefully target specific audiences and avoid imposing unrealistic demands. Efficiently created messages, both extreme and mainstream, may increase overall awareness in terms of specific issues being addressed while also helping shape, for better or worse, popular images of

environmental issues and groups more broadly.

**AUTHOR**

*Jacqueline Stewart is a sophomore at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., majoring in environmental studies.*