

It's About Attitudes: Understanding and reporting the psychology of climate change

DW Workshop Report, by Mark Brayne

Competing against another workshop with the clever inclusion of the word Sex in the title, it was clear that a meeting about Attitudes would attract smaller numbers.

This turned out both to *be* the case (45 or so attended, compared with over 100 for Irene Quayle's exploration of Sex, Catastrophe and Climate Change), but also to *prove* the case set out by workshop chair Mark Brayne (psychotherapist, ex-journalist and founding Director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma in Europe).

His argument? Human beings are programmed by evolution to pay attention to foods and activities immediately central to their survival – like sex, sugar, fat and salt - rather than to longer-term, intangible and distant threats. Which is why it is so hard to engage the media and audiences with the complexities of climate change.

The Attitudes workshop opened with participants asked to complete a Climate Change Attitudes Questionnaire (see attachment) to tease out deeper assumptions about whether the human race in its present numbers and current civilisation can survive the coming century. Most were ambivalent, with scores around five out of 10, but there were notably few who were determinedly optimistic.

Brayne – whose grim predictions of unavoidable catastrophe figured prominently in Deutsche Welle's pre-conference publicity – introduced the discussion by quoting Daniel Goleman (author of Emotional Intelligence) on what might be called the "limbic news" model that currently dominates most journalistic reporting, with attention paid to a rapidly changing succession of immediate but distant threats which are paradoxically soothing to the savage brain.

As several workshop discussants later agreed, what Brayne termed "McNews" is not capable of portraying the complexities of climate and environmental change in ways that might encourage the changes in human behaviour that would be necessary to head off the worst consequences of what we are doing to the planet.

Andreas Ernst, Director of the Centre for Environmental Systems Research (CESR) at Germany's Kassel University, noted how hard it was for journalists with little understanding of the essential science to understand and report the non-linear, complex, multicausal phenomenon of climate change to audiences with their own very limited attention spans.

Public attitudes to climate change were, he said, akin to the psychology of smokers who know that their habit will damage them in the long run but who cannot change in the

present. We are all, he said, trapped in the structures of our lives and habits, “carbon junkies addicted to wealth, wellbeing and every hedonistic drive and pleasure.”

Ernst, a cognitive and environmental psychologist, called for reporting of positive examples of how people are changing, and warned against what he termed learned helplessness as one of the worst illnesses one can catch.

Excessive optimism, he added, is a useful attribute from an evolutionary point of view, but not so helpful in the face of what could be a brutal and sudden environmental tipping point around the middle of the present century. The problem was one of uncertainty and risk perception, and Ernst was, he said, not positive that change in attitudes would be either rapid or easy.

Mary-Jayne Rust, London-based Jungian analyst and one of the UK’s best-known speakers on the psychology of climate change, explained our responses in the context of mankind’s self-understanding as the mythical hero, journeying from a primitive, dark world of cave-dwelling ignorance to a brighter world of ever-increasing knowledge, freedom and wellbeing.

Rust recalled that traditional psychotherapy has been as much part of the problem as of the solution, with its roots in Freud’s definition of the “principle task of civilisation, its actual *raison d’être*, [being] to defend us against nature.”

She called on journalists (who are, after all, in the same narrative-exploring business as therapists) to create what she termed a new story, which is not just about reducing carbon emissions but about changing the way we think about ourselves as humans in relation to the earth.

What we need, said Rust, is a different kind of hero – “one who can live with uncertainty, freely admit to failure and vulnerability, knowing that the dark past is not a womb in which we might get trapped, but a source of wisdom.”

As this was a workshop about feelings as well as ideas, participants were encouraged to share with each other in pairs and threes their immediate *felt* responses to the presentations from Ernst, Rust and Brayne. What then emerged in discussion was awareness of how different cultures are dealing, or not dealing, with the threat of climate change.

A journalist from Tanzania commented that how coercion – *requiring* people to do the right thing – can work better in collectivist societies than it does in individualistic and liberal western nations, while a contributor from Japan picked up Rust’s theme of story-telling, noting how his country’s media were able to explore complex outcomes without the happy end required of Hollywood films in the West.

A Romanian journalist agreed that people won't actually do anything until they're faced with disaster, recalling not just the attitude of smokers but also of the inhabitants of the Pacific island of Krakatoa in 1883, who declined to take refuge away from the island even though convincingly and correctly warned that it was about to explode catastrophically and kill anyone still in its vicinity.

A Brazilian colleague noted the failure of her country's media to connect massive and lethal rainfall in 2009 with climate change – an illustration in Ernst's view of how journalists cannot differentiate between weather and climate - while a speaker from Germany wondered whether there was now space, with a new and different global media culture emerging, to convey messages on climate change in a more neutral, future-oriented sense.

Norwegian journalism trainer Kaare Melhus, in response, acknowledged the pervasive influence of "objectivity"-based Western media models, but was not sure global media could do much more now than just report what they see.

Brayne ended the workshop by emphasising his personal view that, like the alcoholic, humans will not change their behaviour around climate change and carbon consumption until they know that literally their personal survival and that of their children and grandchildren is in danger.

As the French writer Marcel Proust commented in *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (In Search of Lost Times):

"Illness is the most heeded of doctors. To goodness and wisdom we only make promises. We obey pain."