Climate change deniers and advocacy: A situational theory of publics approach

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Abstract

Climate change denial (i.e., organized attempts to downplay, deny or dismiss scientific consensus on the extent of global warming, its significance, and its connection to human behavior) has been a recurrently researched topic in the US, but is far less studied in Europe, where it is currently gathering force. The truth is that, as in the United States, climate deniers are a tiny minority in Europe. Their numbers contrast starkly with the overwhelming majority of scientists who agree on the reality of man-made climate change and the urgent need for action. However, the voices of climate deniers in Europe are amplified by a handful of influence groups, mainly think tanks, which consistently conceal their sources of funding and final interests. This situation can be approached from a strategic communication perspective, specifically within the framework of the situational theory of publics. From this standpoint, the knowledge of different variables relating to publics in a given situation regarding a public issue (like climate change) can determine the communication strategies chosen by deniers to amplify climate change denial arguments and will introduce their main communication strategies and messages.

Introduction

According to Heras (2010), climate change is a complex phenomenon which is difficult to understand and evaluate outside the specific fields pertaining to climate research. However, based purely on elementary common sense one would expect that as science produces more compelling and alarming analyses and the media addresses the issue more fully and rigorously, people will develop a broader perspective of the phenomenon and act accordingly. Yet this does not appear to be the case, as studies analyzing people's reactions to climate change provide results that seem to defy this logic.

The gap between the results of scientific research and social responses to climate change is a wide one. And the mere provision of information does not seem sufficient to narrow it. It therefore seems necessary to acknowledge and characterize human responses to the information reaching us about climate change, attempt to identify the factors that shape them and propose initiatives to help prevent reactions of rejection, indifference or inhibition towards the climate change phenomenon, apparently the majority in many Western societies today.

Various recent studies in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia indicate a significant increase in the number of people who think that climate change is not happening, reject human intervention in the phenomenon, or even deny its negative consequences or threat. In addition, these trends have materialized precisely at a time when the media and social leaders have become more intensely concerned with the issue. Media relations and its strategies have played a

crucial role in shaping the minds of these people, with the result that climate change has become a public relations issue.

A survey conducted in the United States by the Pew Research Center in October 2009 which included the question: "Is there solid evidence that the planet is warming?" yielded the following results: a modest 57% of respondents answered yes, compared to 71% the previous year (April 2008). Meanwhile, 33% said no, compared to 21% in the 2008 survey. Among those who considered that there was solid evidence of global warming, more than a quarter attributed the phenomenon to natural causes, meaning that the total percentage of respondents who considered there to be solid evidence of global warming and associated it with human activity was a scarce 36% of respondents (Heras, 2010; Armitage, 2011).

Studies by the Yale Project on Climate Change (Leiserowitz *et al*., 2010) showed that those Americans who feel that the planet is warming remain in the majority, but noted that the percentage of deniers had doubled in the previous two years, up to 20%. Another finding of this research was that doubts had increased among those who believe that the planet is warming, something that does not occur among those who do not believe it (Heras, 2010).

In the UK, although the percentage of respondents who deny climate change is lower than in the US, opinion polls also indicate an increasing trend. In a recent survey conducted by IPSOS-MORI (Spence *et al.*, 2010), when asked "Do you think the world's climate is changing?", 78% said yes, compared to 15% who said no. In 2005, when faced with the same question the percentages were 91% and 4%, respectively, which means that the number of respondents who deny the phenomenon more than tripled over that period. The increase in denial has also been witnessed in other surveys, such as those conducted for the BBC in 2010. To the question: "As far as you know and have heard, do you think the earth's climate is changing and global warming is taking place?", the number of negative responses rose from 15% (November 2009) to 25% (February 2010).

In Australia, a survey by The Lowy Institute (Hanson, 2010) provided respondents with several alternative phrases to evaluate their attitudes and predispositions towards climate change. The response "Until we are sure that global warming is really a problem we should not take any step that involves economic costs" (indicator of the more denialist position) obtained discreet, although increasing, support (13%), as in 2006 it had only received support from 6%.

In Germany, the weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* published the results of a survey conducted for the magazine by TNS under the headline: "Germans lose fear of climate change". The report (Der Spiegel, 2010) highlighted the fact that only 42% of respondents said they were afraid of climate change, compared to 62% in 2006.

With regard to Spain. The latest opinion polls conducted on the subject show that a large majority of Spaniards acknowledge the existence of climate change, with very few explicitly denying it. In a survey conducted by the Real Instituto Elcano in 2010 -after the Copenhagen summit- only 6% said they "disagree to a certain extent" with the fact that climate change was occurring (Heras, 2010), compared to 83.3% who said they "agree" or "strongly agree" with the idea. With regard to human intervention as a cause,

a survey by Fundación Mapfre (Meira, 2009) found that 86.9% of respondents believed climate change to be caused by human activity or by a mixture of natural and human factors. The same study explored the degree to which some denialist arguments had been instilled in Spanish society, concluding that while in general terms Spanish society is neither "skeptical" nor denialist, arguments that fuel such attitudes do have a certain audience: 35% of respondents agreed with the argument that "it would be better to worry more about fighting poverty than climate change", while 34.2% accepted the idea that "there have always been changes in the climate, which humans have ended up adapting to" (Meira, 2009; Heras, 2010).

Situational theory of publics

These results show that people's attitudes and behaviors perceive –or do not perceive-those situations that affect or may affect them, which is linked to the situational theory of publics. Indeed, Grunig's situational theory "states that communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by such organizational consequences" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148).

The situational theory offers three independent variables, which are used to predict two dependent variables. The three independent variables are problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. These three variables predict the two dependent variables of information seeking and information processing. Regarding the two dependent variables, Grunig (1989) contended that "communication behavior can be either active or passive" (p. 209). Active communication is typified by high levels of information seeking. Individuals who are active communicators expend effort to locate and consume information about the issue under consideration. Further, Grunig also stated (1989) that "people communicating actively develop more organized cognitions, are more likely to have attitudes about a situation, and more often engage in a behavior to do something about the situation" (p. 6). On the other hand, a low level of communication activity, or information processing, produces little or no effort on the part of the individual to seek information. However, if the situation is somewhat involving, the individual will passively process information that is presented to him or her (Hamilton, 1992).

The situational theory can be used effectively to identify publics when different combinations of the three independent variables are developed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The combination of problem and constraint recognition results in four types of perceived situation: problem-facing behavior, constrained behavior, routine behavior and fatalistic behavior (Grunig, 1976; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Furthermore, Grunig explained that the criteria of problem-facing behaviors are high problem recognition and low constraint recognition. If the members of the public have high problem recognition and low constraint recognition, they have a constrained behavior. A routine behavior will occur when the public has a low problem recognition and low constraint recognition. Finally, the combination of low problem recognition and high constraint recognition will create fatalistic behavior.

Public relations managers can measure the three variables of the theory to sort people who might be members of their organization's publics according to their behavior type. "Having placed these people into one of the types, a manager would know what

communication strategy would be best for each" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 154). Furthermore, public relations practitioners who shape denial messages on behalf of climate change denial organizations are challenged to recognize that messages transmitted through whatever channel may be actively pursued and diligently consumed by some individuals, whereas others will at best passively process these messages, given that the message was perceived in the first place.

Situational theory and climate change denialism

The phenomenon of denialism and its rise, against the current of scientific climate research, has been analyzed from different perspectives. Heras (2010) highlighted four. The psychological perspective, which is based on the idea that humans have a proven ability to reject information we find uncomfortable or threatening. The informational perspective, based on the mass media having given the skeptical viewpoint undeserved visibility. This may at times have been motivated by a desire to maintain a balance between stances, regardless of their not having equal representativeness or rigor (Boycoff & Boycoff, 2004). Some studies consider the visibility given to the skeptical position to have had an ideological component in many cases, the English-speaking conservative press being especially prone to spreading denialist ideas with little scientific foundation. Then there is the educational perspective, which argues that inadequate understanding of the nature of science also feeds misunderstandings and is used by denialist lobbies to spread doubt. And finally, the political perspective, which is based on converting climate change into an issue of partisan identity.

Undoubtedly, none of these perspectives are exclusive of one another, nor are they totalizing. There are other avenues of approach. Everything will depend on the choices of the researcher. In our case, we wish to influence the idea of publics from the perspective of public relations, because, as we have said, the actions of climate change deniers are communicative in nature: they use strategic communication and its techniques to address their publics or convert groups of citizens into their publics. Thus, the concept of publics and their shaping becomes key to understanding the communication mechanisms necessary for successfully penetrating denialist ideas into public opinion, the denialism being strategic.

When establishing situational theory, Grunig (1976, 1983; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Repper, 1992) researched the cognitive factors that determine and identify publics based on the definitions of public established by Dewey (1927) and Blumer (1946). According to Dewey (1927), a public is a group of people who: 1) face a similar problem; 2) recognize that the problem exists; 3) organize something to do about the problem. Blumer (1946) defined a public in much the same way. He said a public is a group of people who: 1) are confronted by an issue; 2) are divided in their ideas as to how to meet the issue; 3) engage in discussion over the issue. Using these concepts, the behavioral levels of publics with regard to the problem object of the action of public relations comprise the substrate of situational theory. That is, the situational theory of publics helps to explain when and how groups communicate and in which cases communication with publics will be more effective, an explanation which is very useful at the strategic and tactical level to convince certain groups (publics) or to create favorable publics.

The critical problem, as Grunig (1989) argued, "is to find concepts that predict the circumstances under which communication behavior is active or passive" (p. 209). The three independent variables proposed by Grunig's situational theory reflect the concepts that were deemed to be critical in predicting whether or not individuals will engage in active or passive communication behavior. The independent variables are defined as follows: problem recognition—a situation wherein people detect that something should be done about a situation and stop to think about what to do; constraint recognition—a situation wherein people perceive that there are obstacles in a situation that limit their ability to do anything about the situation; and level of involvement—the extent to which people connect themselves with a situation.

Grunig conducted extensive investigations into the validity of the three independent variables and found general support for not only their existence but also their predictive power. It is not the focus of this section of the article to further determine whether or not situational theory would produce publics that differ in levels of communication activity; rather this section explores the specific ways, if any, in which these groups may differ regarding media/communication behaviors related to climate change denialism communication efforts. Cameron and Yang (1990) concluded that further study should be undertaken to explore "what is meant by information seeking" (p. 25). Specifically they encourage research that looks at the media preferences of active publics. Our subject requires including passive publics in order to examine the strategic and tactical ways in which they turn into advocates of denialism.

As Aldoory et al. (2010) pointed out, according to the situational theory of publics, an individual can react to a message through information seeking or information processing. Of the theory's two dependent variables, information seeking is awarded higher priority because "information-seeking behavior is what characterizes the active players in a public opinion issue" (Slater et al., 1992, p. 190). Information seeking is the purposeful search for information (Aldoory, 2001; Grunig, 1997; Slater et al., 1992). However, with information processing, members of a public do discover or recognize a message (e.g., have seen a report on television, or picked up a pamphlet), although the message is not necessarily acted upon (Aldoory, 2001; Slater et al., 1992).

In the case of climate change, the information seeking variable is crucial, especially for creating non-publics. Indeed, the framing of climate change and its anthropogenic causes in the news media is of great importance to the public's understanding of the subject. "The media play a key role in shaping opinions and values in democratic societies, and climate change reporting is no exception" (Almiron & Zoppedu, 2015, p. 307).

The concept of non-public is one of the categories of public in Grunig's situational theory. They are those groups which do not meet any of the characteristics that define a public, according to Dewey (1927). It is therefore one of the groups that does not feel affected by the problem. From this perspective, denialist groups try not to create the necessary conditions for members of a particular public to either seek or process information that might make them react to the problem of climate change. Media relations strategies are the communicative tool used to this end. However, the aim is to minimize information, as shown by Almiron (2013) and Almiron and Zoppeddu (2015).

Some of Almiron's conclusions regarding the effects of climate change on food and how this is covered in the Spanish and Italian media suggest the idea of non-publics being created. It is not a new phenomenon, however. For years, the news media's representation of climate change and global warming exhibited an irrational skepticism that has now been generally abandoned by most of the media (Almiron & Zoppeddu, 2015, p. 307). As Almiron (2013) points out, Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) demonstrated the over-representation climate change skeptics and deniers managed to achieve in the Western press, especially in the US, throughout the nineties. "Despite the majority scientific consensus of it having predominantly anthropogenic causes, for years the Western press awarded the same authority and relevance to both positions. As other authors have noted, scientists and the media neither were nor are the only actors in this scenario, economic and political interests having also exerted and still exerting considerable pressure" (Almiron, 2013, p. 18).

Despite their subsequently being "a progressively more mature media representation of the issue of global warming" (Almiron, 2013, p. 19), with coverage of those skeptical of or denying anthropogenic causes increasingly an exception in the Western media, the media's portrayal of global warming, or climate change, as with any scientific subject, is of great importance to the public's understanding of the issue and, consequently, to the creation of active publics who seek out and process information on this question.

With regard to media tactics for shaping non-publics, Almiron (2013) highlights some of those used in Spain in the (non) coverage of the report presented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) entitled "Livestock's Long Shadow", which, according to this scholar, constitutes a study with unprecedented conclusions in terms of its expository clarity and force. The authors of the report analyze the impact of the livestock sector on the environment and place it among the largest pollutants on the planet. That is not all, however, as Almiron (2013) states that the newsworthiness of "Livestock's Long Shadow" is obvious not only due to the accurate data with which it quantifies a problem of enormous magnitude previously only evaluated indirectly by government and unofficial agencies, but also because the report is clear on the ultimate cause of the problem and its solution. Almiron (2013) considers this report, of all FAO publications, to have all the qualities deserving of prominent media attention "as it provides citizens with a single tool for resolving what is arguably the most serious problem affecting our societies: the deterioration of the planet on which our survival depends" (Almiron, 2013, p. 24).

According to Almiron (2013), the aforementioned media tactics were:

a) *The report was only very partially transmitted to the public.* Very few articles offered an accurate description of the report and none transmitted the report's conclusions and recommendations. In fact, in the only three articles fully focused on the report, the information was largely incomplete.

b) *In the vast majority of articles journalistic neutrality was not applied to the issue.* Journalistic neutrality, which gives equal weight to all positions, was not present in the sample of articles studied. This happens either when a voice is given to all positions in a minority of cases, but they are not treated equally, or when a voice is not given to all positions.

c) *Most of the articles addressed the real problem with frivolity.* Overall, a general trend was detected of adopting a frivolous tone to address pollution caused by animals or vegetarian options that could reduce the effects of this.

d) *A critical spirit was completely absent from coverage of the report.* None of the articles displayed critical spirit with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of the FAO report. The report was either described without mentioning its contradictions or criticized without foundation.

e) *A large majority of the texts downplayed the problem.* Of the 16 articles studied by Almiron (2013), five did not take sides either explicitly or implicitly and nine, the majority, took sides to downplay the problem. Of the latter, five explicitly downplayed the problem by detracting from the report due to errors in the comparisons it makes, ridiculing those who feel concerned, directly denying the report's findings or assuring that technology will resolve the issue. Only two articles took sides to raise awareness of the problem, and only did so implicitly.

f) *The vast majority of the texts did not mobilize readers to act or even demobilized them.* This piece of data (very consistent with the above) is essential to understanding the strategy of avoiding creating active publics and even avoiding creating any type of public at all. Only three articles invited the reader to act, but always indirectly through third-party statements. Contrarily, most articles were even able to demobilize the reader by presenting the problem as solvable through technology, ridiculing pro-vegetarian activism or even directly denying the fact that the reader could have anything to do with the issue of climate change through the consumption of meat.

Other research has taken the dependent variables of situational theory and combined them, arguing that in today's mediated global environment, information processing and information seeking are often fluid and overlapping, creating for a public information gaining (Kim & Grunig, 2007). "This explanation of situational theory was used to test the utility of information gaining as a dependent variable for explaining communication behavior in response to perceived shared experience with media portrayals at risk" (Aldoory *et al.*, 2010, p. 135).

The aforementioned three independent variables of the theory —level of involvement, constraint recognition, and problem recognition— influence the likelihood for information seeking and information processing. Level of involvement is the degree of personal connectedness or relevance to an issue. When an issue has high personal relevance in an individual's life, any message regarding that issue will resonate, be more salient, and be processed at greater rates (Aldoory, 2001; Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Problem recognition refers to the extent to which people recognize an issue as a dilemma. If people are aware of a problem, they often detect something should be done and stop to think about it (Grunig, 1997). Constraint recognition involves the perceived or actual barriers that hinder people from doing something about a problem.

From this standpoint, the situational theory of publics can provide risk communication researchers with a framework for studying responses to risk messages (Aldoory & Van Dyke, 2004, 2006), and some scholars have already found the theory useful in this respect. For example, as Aldoory *et al.* (2010) point out, Major (1993) found that for a landfill issue, problem-facing and constrained publics were more likely to conduct

information-seeking behavior regardless of their level of involvement. In another study, Roser and Thompson (1995) examined how fear appeals can generate level of involvement. They found that publics who had emotional involvement with a topic responded more emotionally to new information. The researchers found that an active public was formed through this emotional arousal.

Major (1993) set out to determine whether environmental concern could expand the capacity of situational theory to differentiate ecologist publics from non-publics, conducting an empirical study based on telephone surveys. This author suggests that recognition of the problem provides a cognitive measure of environmental awareness and is associated with communication behavior; however, although level of involvement and environmental concern provide measures of respondents' attitudes towards environmental issues, these variables are not associated with communication behavior. Therefore, as noted by Míguez (2006), since the relationship between cognition and communication is much stronger than that between affect and communication, public relations objectives designed to increase awareness and knowledge of an organization's position on the environment will be more effective than attitudinal objectives designed to create a more favorable image of the organization. This principle is also found in the strategies of denialist groups that use experts as messengers without identifying the name of the organization behind them.

As Plehwe (2014) notes, it is well known that many climate change denial efforts have been financed by Exxon Mobile, thanks to a study of the Union of Concerned Scientists (2007) and subsequent tracking and tracing of the flow of Exxon money to climate change denial authors and think tanks by Greenpeace USA. It is also known that more than 90% of skeptical or denialist climate change papers in the United States originate from right-wing (neoliberal, conservative) think tanks registered in a database of the US Heritage Foundation, which was the flagship for the "Reagan Revolution" (Plehwe, 2014, p. 108). Contrarily, more than 90% of the think tanks on this register have also been found to feature climate change denial perspectives (Jaques *et al.* 2008).

Conclusion and further research

These data not only confirm the validity of situational theory, but also demonstrate that presenting denialist spokespersons as experts acts as a firewall for the two dependent variables of Grunig's theory, amplifying the practical value of the theory.

In addition, data obtained from research, such as the aforementioned conducted by Jaques *et al.* (2008), are also useful in corroborating the importance of other research findings on situational theory and its application to the strategies employed by climate change deniers. Another of these studies focuses on the influence of perceived similarity in situational theory. The concept of perceived similarity has been integral to some theories that explain persuasive effects and behavior change in the face of health risk. For example, social cognitive theory predicts that individuals who identify with media portrayals (i.e., perceived similarity) will likely model or emulate the behavior displayed by the portrayal (given other factors such as self-efficacy and reward) (Bandura, 2002). This identification process typically begins when individuals perceive similarity between themselves and the portrayal. Experimental studies have indicated that perceived similarity to individual cases reported in the news increased news salience.

In one study of similarity, Siegrist *et al*. (2001) found that individuals judged whether their values were similar to those of people portrayed in media. In other studies, as victims went from being uninjured to injured, to being killed in a carjacking news story, participants who perceived themselves to be similar to the victims increased their perceptions that carjacking was a serious problem (Gibson & Zillman, 1994; Zillman, 2002). These participants were not more likely to feel personally vulnerable. In other words, problem recognition was increased but level of involvement —personal judgment of risk— was not. Climate change denial organizations have a strategic objective of perceived similarity in their communication and public relations campaigns. The use of expert spokespersons is a tactic in achieving this goal.

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