Developing an evidence-based approach to climate change communications

Insider Action Research in partnership with Fossil Free Berlin

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Abstract

Communication practitioners are failing to engage publics and generate sufficient political will for decisive and timely action on climate change. Despite recent progress in climate communications research, a research-practice gap means evidenced-based approaches are not being adopted by practitioners. This degree project seeks to generate practical knowledge to support the campaigning group Fossil Free Berlin (FFB), of which I am a member, and climate communicators more broadly. FFB is part of the global Divestment Movement – a decentralised, grassroots campaign which aims to stigmatise the fossil fuel industry to mitigate climate change. Using Insider Action Research, I collaborated with the group to develop the following research question: “How can FFB positively and effectively engage audiences to act on climate change, in particular target audiences for our upcoming campaign (MP and the general public).” We found that values and frames, appropriate messengers and social norms can be leveraged to reach traditionally sceptical or inactive centre-right audiences. Positive storytelling, and relatable messaging can also bring the problem closer to home, empowering audiences to act – if communicated in conjunction with viable routes to change. As both the primary researcher and a member of the group, I use autoethnography and personal narrative to address issues of subjectivism and representation and communicate findings in an engaging, accessible way. This study is consciously written in the first person using broadly accessible language, and reflects on my feelings and experiences.
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Foreword

I would like to thank my supervisor Tobias Denskus, all the members of the Fossil Free Berlin campaign group, my ‘critical friends’ Mona Freundt and Zoe Steley for their helpful comments on this paper, my interview subject Tytus Murphy, and my special friend Pavlos Happilos for his unfailing support throughout the two years of this MA course.
Introduction

Background

Opportunities abound to communicate climate change; record-breaking weather events are occurring year-on-year – at the time of writing, global temperatures have been warmer than average for the past 400 months in a row (Willingham, 2018). Despite this, media coverage of the issue is declining (Hymas, 2017 and Nuccitelli, 2016). The public also exhibits low levels of concern; climate change was placed at the bottom of issues that matter most in the UN's 2015 global online poll ‘My World’ (data.myworld2015.org). Research tells us “that policymakers tend to broadly align their choices with what the majority of citizens prefer (McGrath and Bernauer, 2007, p. 1).” Responding to the crisis of climate change is therefore no longer a question of science or technology, it is a matter of public engagement and the political will to act.

Despite academic progress on climate change communication in recent years, many practitioners continue to employ the same ineffective approaches that have failed to illicit commensurate action. These include a focus on awareness raising over emotional engagement; on science and environmental costs over accessibility and human costs; and on catastrophe over positive stories and routes to change. As a member of local divestment group, Fossil Free Berlin (FFB), and a communications for development practitioner, I rarely have the opportunity to stop, take stock, and critically review the group’s or my own approach to climate communications. This research intends to bridge the gap between progress on climate communications research and practice in my own work, for FFB, and for other communication practitioners and campaign groups.

Outline

This study takes a Participatory Insider Action Research (Coghlan, 2014) approach in collaboration with the climate group FFB. The aim is to support the group in achieving its communication goals through research, empowering it to decide research questions and reflect on findings. This study was conducted in
four repeating cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and critical analysis (Davis, 2004, p.20). As most cycles contain a literature review, a shortened literature review has been included in the main body of the paper to provide context. Each cycle redirects the focus of the research based on insights derived from previous cycles.

Analysis and reflection on the practical implications of research findings are interwoven within each cycle, and are summarised in the conclusion at the end. Action Research is also combined with autoethnography – a form of self-reflexive ethnographic field work, in which the investigator belongs to the group being studied, and the author’s subjectivity is accounted for through autobiographical writing (Maréchal, 2012, p.44). To this end, the practical management of the project is illustrated through personal narrative (written in a contrasting font) – “autobiographical vignettes (Maréchal, 2012, pp. 45).” – designed to provide a window on the community (FFB) and expose the inherent biases of the author.

**Problem and context**

The politicization of the issue of climate change creates unique communication challenges in the context of increasing polarisation in countries such as Germany. Left-wing (often cosmopolitan) audiences tend to more readily accept the scientific consensus that human activity causes climate change (Bower, 2018), but even ‘believers’ show low-levels of concern and motivation to act – to demonstrate in the streets or lobby politicians. A higher proportion of right-wing (often communitarian) audiences reject climate change science entirely, some dismissing it as a leftist conspiracy to centralise control and tax business (Marshall, 2014, p.18). Centre-right audiences may believe that climate change is real, but diminish its threat and continue to oppose solutions, such as renewable energy projects.

A perfect storm of psychological and ideological phenomena have converged to enable different audience groups to either ignore, diminish, or reject the reality of climate change. Climate risks appear distant and exaggerated; the long-term
nature of the issue results in audience fatigue; politicisation leads people to deny the problem because they disagree with the policy solutions, or they feel their social group is being attacked; and the scale of the problem enables people to rationalise inaction, believing that they are “too small to make a difference.”

Such problems are compounded by ineffective communication approaches, including the use of abstract, heavily caveated scientific language and imagery; a focus on gradual change and unrelatable impacts in a distant time or place (2100 deadlines, polar bears on shrinking ice caps); alarmist ‘end of the world’ imagery and storytelling; failing to offer meaningful or actionable routes to change (i.e. focus on switching to energy efficient light bulbs over political activism); a lack of positive success stories positive and future vision (progress of renewables, restoration of forests); and failing to reach out and engage climate sceptics and right-wing audiences (use of inappropriate messengers, focus on leftist policy solutions) (Moser, 2016, p.354-355).

The Divestment Movement brings the complex, global challenge of climate change down to the local level, inviting people to question local government, universities and businesses about their support for fossil fuels. Divestment also represents an opportunity to mobilise mainstream segments of society: it has achievable goals and regular campaign successes, which inspire people to become active and counter a sense of fatalism; it employs a mix of compelling economic arguments that appeal to politicians and centre-right audiences, and social justice, environmental and moral arguments that engage activists and left-wing audiences; and it has a clearly defined opponent – the fossil fuel industry.

Thanks to this combination of elements, the movement has become the “fastest growing divestment campaign yet seen (Carrington, 2015),” attracting a new breed of climate activist, and winning key successes, including the City of New York, the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, and the Guardian Media Group. Divestment’s theory of change is to remove the social license of the fossil fuel industry, which is legitimised by the many public and private institutions invested in it. In a similar vein to the divestment campaign targeting South Africa
opposing apartheid, the movement seeks to publically demonstrate moral objection through the withdrawal of financial support. Divestment is therefore a political strategy, and not an attempt to financially harm the industry.

FBB is comprised of local volunteers who organise divestment campaigns targeting local government and businesses. Following a successful campaign in 2016 to divest Berlin’s local government pensions from fossil fuels, the group is in the process of planning and coordinating a national campaign to divest 600,000 central government pensions (Fossil Free Deutschland, 2018). As with most divestment campaigns targeting government authorities, the campaign has two main audiences: the general public and MPs. The aim is to mobilise the public to generate political will, while directly engaging decision-makers (often behind the scenes) to change government policy and secure vocal support for further campaigning.

**Aims and intervention objective**

In the case of FFB, not only am I an ‘insider’ ethnographer (i.e. native to the culture being studied), I am also a group insider (Maréchal, 2012, pp. 46). I will therefore be on hand to carry forward and make use of the findings after the study has concluded, even if other group members do not. Nonetheless, my aim is to generate practical solutions that are useful to – and critically used by – group members in their work.

Other benefits of being an insider include good access to information and contacts, and established relationships which engender trust. I am also personally invested in the group and support its aims, and was therefore highly motivated to conduct the research and produce a valued end result. I began with a simple intervention objective of ‘supporting the group in a way that it chooses’ within the framework of a Communications for Development MA course. The research question(s) would be collectively set by the group and refined or redirected over each research iteration.
Core theories

This degree project does not seek to generate, prove or disprove theory; it engages a specific community of people in a dialogue to work towards a more informed understanding of their current situation. I do not seek to solely contribute to the literature, but to create real-world solutions for one campaign group, at this specific moment in time, and by extension similar campaign groups working towards the same goals around the world who may access this paper.

As this non-traditional study was created through an emergent process, and is highly context specific and practical in nature, it was not designed with a set theoretical framework in mind. However, as the research unfolded, a range of communication theories were touched on and are briefly introduced in this section and presented in more detail throughout the text. In this section, I also define a key term in the title of this paper – communication – and critically analyse the primary communication theory and practice that resulted from the emergent research process: public relations.

Communication theories:

• **Confirmation Bias**: Marshall explains confirmation bias as the tendency to ‘cherry-pick’ information that reinforces our existing beliefs. This creates mental maps referred to as schemas, so that “when we encounter new information we modify it to squeeze into this existing schema, a process psychologists call biased assimilation (2014, p.14).” Confirmation bias is grounded in psychology, but is also associated with communication theory, and has received attention in recent years as social media ‘echo chambers’ appear to amplify the tendency, contributing to increased political polarisation.

• **Values**: Blackmore et al. (2013) suggest that values are important in environmental communication, as they affect attitudes and motivate people to act. They find that intrinsic values are highly correlated with
behaviours that benefit the environment, and extrinsic values reduce people's willingness to protect the environment.

- **Frames:** As mass communication theory, framing refers to the 'packaging' of information by the media to encourage a particular interpretation of a news story. Blackmore et al. describe frames as connecting values through language: "Every word or concept is mentally connected to a number of associated words, memories, emotions and values. This set of associations is known as a frame. (2013, p.38)." Therefore, reframing a problem can affect what people will think, feel or do about it.

- **Social norms:** Social norms exist at the societal level, but also within smaller groups (i.e. a workplace), as an understanding of behaviour considered acceptable by the group. Social norms are considered highly influential, alongside attitudes towards a behaviour and the perceived difficulty of acting. Social norms can be leveraged in communication messages to 'nudge' behaviour, such as to increase voter turnout (Gerber and Rogers 2009) or reduce energy consumption (Marshall, 2014, p.29).

**Definition of communication in the context of C4D**

Manyozo (2012, p. 19) identifies three main methodological and theoretical approaches to communication for development: media for development; media development; and participatory and community communication. This study focuses on the first of Manyozo's approaches, media for development, which he describes as "the strategic employment of media and communication as facilities for informing, educating and sensitising people about... pertinent social issues (2012, p.54)" and the promotion of "best-bet practices" (2012, p.15) to elicit behaviour change. He adds that media for development encompasses social change and social marketing theory, among others. My rationale for this choice is grounded in the limitations of FFB's current understand of and approach to communications.

FFB's communications sub-group, of which I am a member, is responsible for publications and the dissemination of messages via established channels,
primarily the media and social media. As part of this study, I do not intend to challenge or interrogate the workings of the group, but to support its current communication activities. Although this approach has its limitations, including being largely broadcast in nature and non-participatory, this is the reality of how the group considers and manages communication. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I define communication as Public Relations (PR).

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines PR as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (prdefinition.prsa.org).” In terms of FFB’s aims and objectives, this includes activism, behaviour change communications, education, awareness raising, and advocacy. Separate FFB sub-groups, of which I am not a member, focus on more participatory communication approaches (community/campaign work) and will not be the focus of this degree project.

Manyozo is critical of media for development approaches similar to public relations, describing them as top-down methods by communication experts with limited audience consultation that have failed to challenge the dominant political economy of development. However, the Divestment Movement’s theory of change seeks to work within, not against, the dominant political economy of energy production. Smith says that activists use strategies from the field to practice PR ‘from the bottom up,’ albeit employing the same techniques as institutionalised organisations (2013, pp. 7). Although the non-participatory dimension of public relations is problematic, due to the mass communication dimension of FFB’s current campaign (targeting the whole of Germany), and the limited time and resources of the group, it offers a viable, practical solution to achieving the group’s communication goals.

**Public relations**

Coombs and Holladay (2012) state that activist groups were using public relations techniques before corporate PR was created. The first PR firm dates back to around the turn of the last century, when Ivy Lee opened a ‘counselling
office’ and issued the first ever press release in 1906 (Cutlip, 1994, p. 45). In the 1920s, Edward Bernays advocated the use of psychological research, and in the 1950s PR firm Hill & Knowlton used industry-funded research to sew seeds of doubt about the public health dangers of tobacco. Employing a similar tactic, Oreskes and Conway (2010) reveal in their book ‘Merchants of Doubt’ how corporations, conservative think tanks and scientists on their payroll have worked to sustain controversy about the scientific consensus on climate change over the last 20 years.

In the wrong hands, PR can clearly be used as a propaganda tool to spread misleading or biased information for financial or political gain. Yet with vested interests and ‘hidden persuaders’ distorting media narratives on key issues of public concern, the use of the comparable methods – so long as they are grounded in facts – by transparent, public-facing, ethical organisations can be beneficial in redressing this imbalance. For every fascist government or terrorist organisation employing PR, there is a university working to disseminate research or NGO conducting a campaign for the public good. As Scott Cutlip wrote:

“As an author and teacher in this field since 1946, I would repeatedly cite chapter and verse to critics of the good for society that can be accomplished through ethical, effective public relations... I held, and still hold, that only through the expertise of public relations can causes, industries, individuals and institutions make their voice heard in the public form where thousands of shrill, competing voices daily re-create the Tower of Babel (1994, p ix).”

Cutlip identifies key advantages and disadvantages with regards to public relations. On the positive side, PR stresses the need for public approval thereby improving the conduct of organisations, it serves the public interest by making more voices heard in public forums, and it can serve a fragmented society using “talents of communication and mediation to replace misinformation with information, discord with concord (2014, p. xiii).” On the negative side, Cutlip finds public relations has choked communication channels with “pseudo-events
and phony sound bites (p.xiii)” creating confusion rather than clarity, and engendering a sense of cynicism in the public.

Despite these negative consequences, small campaign groups such as FFB would be practically invisible without employing PR approaches, and can drastically scale up their impact through smart and creative media relations and campaigning. Although public relations seeks to understand human psychology and engage audiences emotionally (which could be construed as manipulative), the issue of climate change is already tangled up with human psychological responses – some of which the result of counterproductive communication approaches. FFB makes a concerted effort to check facts, build trust and work collaboratively with the general public, its communication efforts should therefore not be conflated with propaganda.

The use of advocacy in public relations is controversial in the literature. Many scholars argue that advocacy involves persuasion, is asymmetrical, and therefore unethical. Others, including Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) believe ‘responsible advocacy’ is central to PR practices. Advocacy by its very nature is subjective, yet it can still work to serve society if its goal is to contribute to public debates in a truthful way. Although not entirely unproblematic, public relations remains a widely-used, legitimate, and effective communication approach that employs audience segmentation, messaging and social media engagement.

**Authorship**

I am the sole author of this study, FFB have supported the research process, offered their opinions, given feedback and have provided their consent for publication. I am responsible and accountable for this paper, and have independently analysed and developed the findings and recommendations. The presentation of each cycle in this paper does not reflect the manner in which the findings were discussed in group meetings. For clarity, when I refer to ‘the group’ throughout this study, I do not include myself. Where ideas or comments were derived from group members, this is clearly highlighted in the text.
Literature Review

Why climate communications is failing

Climate change cannot be experienced like the weather; its impacts may be seen, but it is difficult to conceptualise, as it only exists in cultural representations (Fløttum, 2016, p. 2), many of which are abstract and scientific, or have a political agenda. Nerlich, Koteyko, and Brown (2010, p.98) quote Hulme (2007) in saying that climate change is not just a physical problem to be solved, it is a “matrix of power relationships, social meanings and cultural discourses that it reveals and spawns.” It is a vast and complex global problem, both in terms of science and politics. Climate change communications are further problematized by the politicisation of the issue and the way human beings assess risks.

The ‘information-deficit’ (Pepermans and Maeseele, 2016, p.479) communication approach – the idea that the public need to know more about climate impacts and risks – has failed to generate political action or change behaviours due to its simplistic view of audience. The deficit model “assumes that the public are ‘empty vessels’ waiting to be filled with useful information upon which they will then rationally act (Nerlich, Koteyko, and Brown, 2010, p. 100).” Although educational messages are still needed where awareness and understanding are low, new approaches to climate change communication will be required to generate and sustain the necessary political will for commensurate action.

There is an urgent need for climate communication practitioners to progress beyond awareness raising and fear mongering “to active engagement, on how to communicate effectively in a deeply politicized and polarized environment, and on how to deal with the growing sense of overwhelm and hopelessness observed among many audiences (Moser, 2016, p. 353).” Practitioners need to understand the emotional and psychological barriers and motivators to engaging and acting on climate change, such psychological distance and the power of social norms. A more relatable and emotive approach must be combined with practical and
achievable routes to change, into which audiences can channel their energies (such as Divestment campaigning).

**Research practice gap in climate communications**

Most climate communications is not evidence-based. Practitioners tend to apply the same tried and tested communication approaches, neglecting the fact that climate change is a special case. It is tangled up with ideology, psychology, and vested interests, and requires sustained engagement. Climate advocacy organisations have traditionally relied on their communication teams or agencies, yet “such applied work-for-hire is not accompanied by a comprehensive review of the latest relevant communication science, and typically is proprietary, thus not widely available or broadly shared (Moser, 2016, p. 357).”

Recent evidence finds “a research-practice gap exists for climate change communication, whereby practitioners are not making optimal use of knowledge that exists and scholars are not answering questions most relevant to practitioners (Han and Stenhouse, 2015, p. 369).” Climate communication researchers do engage with non-academic communication, including writing blogs and making videos to engage the public, but most do not support practitioners in a systematic, sustained way. Furthermore, researchers are not incentivized to disseminate findings beyond academia, “it is time-consuming to do; researchers are not trained to do so effectively, and given the often polarized atmosphere around climate change, many shy away from it (Moser, 2016, p. 356).”

At the same time, practitioners rarely have the time or inclination to read abstract, academic reports with little guidance on how theory should be practically applied. Navigating through the multidisciplinary field of climate change communication research can also be a daunting prospect for lay audiences. To make findings useful to practitioners, researchers need to “translate what we know into usable knowledge so that we can provide it to
practitioners in timely ways and in appropriate packages (Han and Stenhouse, 2015, p. 402).”

State of play: climate communications research

Climate change communication has developed into a diverse branch of multidisciplinary research, covering areas such as framing and messaging, language, imagery and storytelling, emotions and psychology, decision-making, social media, the role of the arts, and motivation and capacity for action. In recent years, there has been significant growth in the amount of climate communications research (Moser, 2016, p. 347), and the field is now professionalised and well established.

In terms of research on audiences, Moser states that “the role of values, beliefs, worldviews, identity, and meaning-making has become one of the most prominent (2016, p. 350)” and that a great deal of attention has focused on “framing, messaging, and language, and... the question of effectiveness of different messengers (Moser, 2016, p. 350).” He adds that all people filter the information they receive through socially constructed values, that this is unavoidable, and influences the acceptability of climate science, and more importantly, the acceptability of corresponding policies and behaviour change.
Methodology

The Action Research methodology set out below seeks to empower FFB to find practical solutions to problems it wants to solve. The intention is to produce valued insights and actionable recommendations specific to the group, with possible transferable knowledge to other groups. This inclusive approach fits with the ethos and working practices of the group and has built-in flexibility, which is adaptive to a live situation (ongoing campaign planning). The collaborative nature of the approach benefits from a variety of perspectives and gains strength from the knowledge and expertise of committed and experienced activists (FFB group members).

A benefit of Action Research is that it affords the researcher a “combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives and observers” to “add rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to an inquiry (Davis, 2003, p. 12).” Below I set out the primary methods and sources of data collection used in this study, including the observation of the group.

Summary of empirical data collection

- **Literature reviews**: the first step in action research is often to capture what is already known. Reviews of documents created by FFB were also conducted, alongside non-academic sources, including videos, blogs and news articles. Literature reviews were conducted in three out of the four research cycles, and a mini-literature review is included in the following section.

- **Interviews**: the group suggested interviewing similar campaigns in other countries. An interview was set up with the UK campaign Divest Parliament. The interview was conducted via Skype and edited into groups of key messages, before being circulated to the group.

- **Informal conversations and observation**: throughout this process, I have engaged in informal conversations with group members and have observed group discussions to progress my knowledge and
understanding of the problem. I do not keep detailed records of these conversations (i.e. interview transcripts), as I feel that this would create distance and formalise relationships. I am also keen to capture the group’s overarching sentiment, rather than focus on individual comments. Most informal conversations were conducted during the group’s weekly meetings, or by email.

**Defining Action Research**

Action Research unfolds organically and intentionally blurs the boundaries between research and practice, something which runs counter to most structured and systematised academic traditions. Indeed, Herr and Anderson (2005, p.1) describe the method as “designing the plane while flying it.” Its aim is not to test a hypothesis or understand a problem, but to bring about change. Referred to as research-as-activism, it is “a social process in which people deliberately set out to contest and to reconstitute irrational, unproductive (or inefficient) unjust, and/or unsatisfying (alienating) ways of interpreting and describing their world (language/discourses), ways of working (McTaggart, 2000, p. 597-8).

Action Research is research done by or with a group, not ‘on’ them. It tends to focus on problem-solving and generating results with practical application and can be approached in various ways. Participatory Action Research values the group's input and creativity and shows faith in collective decision-making to achieve sustainable change (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire, 2003). FFB values democratic processes, it is part of the group's culture – for example, if members of the group agree with something being said, they silently wave their hands to indicate their approval.

According to Lewin (1948) Action Research is iterative in nature, following a cycle of plan, act, observe, reflect. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe such researchers as ‘quilt makers’ and Winter (1996) likens action research papers to a collage. In a similar way, this paper goes through four cycles, creating a
patchwork effect of research layered with personal narrative that combines to create a whole piece. This study’s design was emergent and non-linear; as new data came in, the investigation was directed off at a tangent, and research questions were revised or rewritten. Reason and Bradbury (2001, p.xx vii) say that “the primary ‘rule’ in action research practice is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences.” I therefore documented when and how decisions are made and aimed to discuss the ethical implications of decisions.

**Insider Action Research**

Insider Action Research is when a complete (i.e. non-temporary) member of an organisation researches its working practices in order to understand a problem and work towards change (Coghlan, 2014, p.1). Insiders benefit from a certain level of pre-understanding, bringing with them pre-existing relationships and knowledge of the issues involved. Insider Action Research is often helpful when timed with the planning of a new activity – in this case, FFB’s upcoming campaign targeting central government pension funds. Insights were needed during the campaign planning phase in order to develop an evidence-based communication strategy.

Reason and Bradbury (2001, SAGE) said that Action Research is for them, for us, and for me, meaning the findings are for academic interest, for a specific group, and for personal growth. I also believe that the insights from this degree project will be relevant for other activist groups, particularly the 1,300 [fossilfreeberlin.org/uber-uns-2](http://fossilfreeberlin.org/uber-uns-2) divestment groups around the world. I will raise the question of how to signpost this learning to such groups at an FFB meeting following completion of this study.

**Lived experience and personal narrative**

Lived experience acknowledges that no study run or written by people can be one hundred percent objective. It is therefore preferable to set subjectivity in
context – it is not about being “more objective and less subjective, but rather to understand the false distinction between these two categories (Reed-Danahay, 2017, p.147).” Lived experience presents the personal as political, enabling the reader to learn about society through a single life (Boylorn, 2012, p. 1). It works to address issues of relativism and representation by presenting “tropes of storytelling that can reveal aspects of the social positioning of the author (Reed-Danahay, 2017, p.146).”

I use the first person singular in this paper to abandon any claims to a neutral standpoint and prompt audiences to undertake a critical reading of my interpretations. I also hope a more personal, informal style will make this research more accessible to broader audiences and more engaging on an emotional and moral level. The narrative snippets throughout this paper are designed to create understanding of the community I am a part of, and convey a sense of how the research process unfolded.

**Working practices**

I initially wanted to involve the group at each stage of the research process, but as it is comprised of time-pressured volunteers, I decided to focus on collaborative decision-making. The group were generally not involved in gathering or analysing data, but were able to suggest readings, reflect on findings, and discuss and agree the direction for each iteration of research. In this sense, the group took on the role of a project steering committee, while I acted as research expert, gathering and condensing data, and reporting findings to the group in an accessible, non-academic briefing format.

The group has a physical meeting once a week, and an active email list. Each research update was circulated to the group via email, giving members the opportunity to consider findings ahead of weekly meetings. At the meetings, I would present findings and facilitate the subsequent discussion – observations, reflections and analysis from the group, and agreement of next steps. Data was
collected over four research iterations, which I term ‘cycles’. The group was updated at the end of each cycle, and was free to browse through the primary sources (literature) and previous research updates on a shared drive.

It is common in Action Research to enlist the help of ‘critical friends’ (Anderson and Herr 2005) – colleagues that can question assumptions and knowledge and keep you on track, without involving the whole group. I therefore approached one group member (Mona), and a friend associated with Divest London (Zoe) to ask them to take on this validation role and guide my decision-making throughout this process.

**Challenges and weaknesses**

Working conditions were difficult, as although the group was generally engaged and supportive, there were many competing issues to discuss. Due to demands on time, it was not always possible to get a slot in the meeting agenda to discuss findings or progress the study. It was also difficult to ascertain feedback or make decisions by email due to the high-volume of mails sent by the group. I therefore decided to fit with the natural flow of the meetings, taking care not to come across as too ‘pushy’ – despite having my own deadlines to consider within the degree course. I believe this has been a successful approach, although it has led to a slower progression of the study than I envisioned – especially as I was unable to attend every week.

The time pressure resulted in generally rushed, broad-brush feedback, discussions and decision-making. Follow up actions were also not decided democratically (i.e. by show of hands), as reaching consensus tends to be a time consuming process within the group. However, I felt there was strong trust that we were working towards a collective aim, and that as long as I captured the general will of the group and acted accordingly, there was no need to discuss at length or vote on every decision. The group was also given ample opportunity to
communicate any dissatisfaction with the direction of the research via email or in person.

In addition to time restraints, it was difficult to fully relinquish control of the study, as I was invested in its success in a way that other members were not (i.e. I will be graded for it as part of my MA). Nevertheless, I have consciously avoided leading discussions or voicing my own opinions during research presentations to learn from their reactions and enable them to lead on decision-making. Although the group controls the direction of travel, I am aware that I retain considerable influence over the detail as data gatherer. I am not overly concerned that the group does not have full agency. Not only is this impractical, as initiator and coordinator of this group activity, the group expected me to work independently and make executive decisions.

I was aware that decision-making processes were not always entirely inclusive. Some members come to meetings every week and take on a leadership role. They are highly informed on the subject matter, and can be more vocal and dominate discussions. Other members attend less consistently, they may be younger and inexperienced, and can remain silent throughout meetings. Nevertheless, I believe I was able to gather enough varied input during each meeting to get a representative sample of the group's position.

A key learning for future research could be to work with a smaller group to gain richer insights, for instance, the communications subgroup, of which I am a member, or a dedicate group of volunteers. This small group could communicate via a separate email list, via social media or a digital collaboration tool, such as Slack. A smaller, more committed group could also engage directly in data gathering, research and analysis, which would increase the sense of collective ownership of the study. To alleviate time pressure, I would also suggest separate progress meetings that take place outside of normal meeting times, although securing participation could represent a challenge in this instance.
Who the group members and I are (and how we interpret the world) is integral to how we see ourselves and understand the research findings. I am therefore cognisant (and openly acknowledge) that my identity, biases, prior knowledge, and social standing, alongside those of the group, are present throughout this study.

**Social conditions of group members**

The group is mostly comprised of people with a similar background; white, educated, and (ostensibly) middle-class. A core membership of around six people attend most meetings, a further group of approximately 10 - 15 people attend sporadically, some of whom I have not met (but are referred to on occasion). Most members are German, although there are members from the US, UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere. There are two (ostensibly) minority-ethnic members (that I have met), and the gender split appears to be roughly 50/50. Ages range from approximately 20 – 50 years old. The group ranges from students, interns and young professionals working in media and climate policy, to those with no professional connection to the group’s themes.

**Declaring my identity**

I believe an understanding of my own identity as the report’s author is useful for readers in interpreting meaning and gauging subjectivism. I would therefore like to introduce myself and explain my connection to the Divestment Movement. I am a university-educated, middle-class, white British male aged 36. I consume left-leaning media and broadly socialise with liberal people who hold similar views to me on climate change – ranging from activists to concerned citizens. I believe in anthropogenic climate change, and see it as the most important challenge of our times. I am generally more interested in the human aspects of climate change, and am also concerned by global poverty and wealth inequality.

I first became aware of the Divestment Movement in London, where I attended several local meetings. For the last six months I have been attending meetings in
Berlin. Although I am British, I believe I am broadly accepted as a cultural insider in the group, as the city is highly international (meetings are conducted in English). I do, however, occasionally lack cultural understanding around issues discussed by the group.

This study affords me two roles in the group – friend/colleague and researcher. The group is generally welcoming, accepting, and encouraging, and I have not encountered any scepticism, resistance or confusion about my role and motivation. I am also part of the communications subgroup, charged with managing FFB’s external relations and planning the communications for the upcoming campaign. The study therefore complements my own ambitions within the group – to play to my skills and experiences as a communications professional.

**Cycle 1 – values and frames: engaging the right**

**Negotiating a research partnership**

Wicks and Reason offer advice on opening communicative spaces in action research group work, warning that rushing too quickly is “nearly always a mistake (2009, p. 250).” I therefore decided to introduce the idea behind the study gradually over several weeks. My first step was to outline this MA course, explain how and why action research is conducted, and share my proposed intervention objective. My aim was to obtain the group’s active, prior and informed consent, before discussing the research question and methodology.

I admittedly worked to position the study as an opportunity for the group – a chance to have some ‘free research’ done on a subject of their choosing. I was anxious to get a positive response and pre-empt any concerns about demands on their time by stressing benefits to the group. The proposal was positively received across the board, with group members expressing gratitude for having targeted research support, and one member (Katja) especially excited at the prospect of taking part in action research – something she had heard about, and wanted to try.
Research question and action points

Research questions in Action Research are often formalised expressions of quandaries or reoccurring problems that resurface in day-to-day work. Although they are generally central issues, they tend to get de-prioritised, as staff or community members are too preoccupied with their usual tasks to take on large, complex problems. Action Research offers a way to step back “from what is often a daily struggle to gain perspective through systematic inquiry (Herr and Anderson, 2005, pp.72). The following personal narrative outlines how I worked with the group to develop a research question for the first cycle:

A few weeks after introducing the study, I asked the group if there were any contentious topics that could be addressed through research. Mona, an active group member who works in climate policy, began by saying that the issue of “how we frame ourselves” and “how we positively engage stakeholders” had never been properly thought through. She said that to “change the status quo, we need to understand the psychology behind climate communications and stop repeating the same mistakes.”

Mathias, a longstanding member and de facto group leader, suggested using the research to plan for the group’s upcoming national campaign on central government pensions. Katja, another regular attendee, added that we should specifically look at how to frame messages for the campaign’s two main target groups: MPs and the general public (including constituents of MPs and relevant pension holders). Other research ideas were put forward, such as researching pension funds, but the group agreed to focus on framing and audience after I explained that I needed to keep a communications focus for the MA course.

We all agreed that the first step should be to find out what information was already out there. I offered to do some desk research and took notes as people suggested books, articles and videos to check out.
I rounded off the discussion by offering to capture what had been said in the meeting in the form of a research question. I later followed up by email with the following suggestion: “How can FFB positively and effectively engage audiences to act on climate change, in particular target audiences for our upcoming campaign (MP and the general public).”

**Literature review and analysis**

**Values and frames**

Moser said that people make sense of the things they hear, see and read “through the filters of culturally transmitted values,” which is inescapable, “although we can become conscious of this influence and actively probe it, if we are willing (2016, p. 350).” Nisbet describes frames as ‘interpretive storylines’ that can trigger particular thought patterns, telling us “why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it (2009, p. 15).” Frames are built on values, life experiences, and the social cues of our in-group, directing us to pay attention and actively seek out certain information, while denying or ignoring other information (Marshall, 2014, p.80).

Even the basic “facts of climate science are not self-evident – they are filtered through people’s political ideologies and belief systems (Adam Corner, 2013, p. 9).” Audiences will readily accept ‘facts’ – even from questionable sources – if they fit within their worldview, and choose to consume media that reinforces their established frames. Values and frames not only affect a person’s belief in climate change, but critically what behaviour change and policy solutions they believe are suitable. Engaging audiences via different frames can radically alter their acceptance or resistance to the same information.
The ‘universal values’ wheel depicts 10 values found in all cultures identified through decades of psychological research (Corner, 2013, p. 13)

Certain values are associated with each other, and others are diametrically opposed (see values wheel above). Focusing on one set of values diminishes the importance of opposing values, at least temporarily. Targeting intrinsic or altruistic values has been found to result in more sustainable behaviour change. For example, leveraging extrinsic or selfish values, such as the economic benefits of acting on climate change (i.e. cheaper energy) is “unlikely to lead to meaningful, long-term engagement with the underlying issue of climate change (Adam Corner, 2013, p. 14).” If the economic conditions change (i.e. the price of oil drops), people’s allegiance may shift as they have not bought into the moral argument.
People also tend to have fatalistic responses to extrinsic framings – they feel powerless to change the situation and may externalise the solution, pushing the responsibility to act on others. Appealing to intrinsic values is more empowering and inspires people to act. Corner gives example of two transport videos containing largely the same information, one with an economic framing, and the other with a community health framing. People who watched the economic video had little faith in their ability to change things and felt that the government was responsible for finding a solution. Those who watched the community video felt empowered and motivated to act (Adam Corner, 2013, p. 15).”

Extrinsic framing is highly relevant to FFB, as some of the group’s core messaging is positioned within a capitalist paradigm. A key argument is that buying shares in fossil fuels is investing pension funds in ‘stranded assets’ – betting public money on the wrong horse. This argument is becoming increasingly compelling, as the Paris Agreement on climate change signals the decarbonisation of the global economy – and the ultimate devaluation of the fossil fuel industry. It does not, however, compel people to care about the causes and impacts of climate change.

Extrinsic FFB messaging may contribute towards achieving the campaign’s main aim (i.e. divesting central government pensions from fossil fuels by achieving a critical mass of public/MP support to influence the relevant parliamentary committees that decide pension policy), but won’t necessarily help with secondary aims, such as reinvesting pension money in a clean energy future, or turning MPs into climate activists or divestment campaigners. However, used in combination with moral arguments, economic arguments could tip the balance for unconvinced, yet receptive audiences.
FFB’s ‘Newbie welcome package’ says that to keep to within 2 degrees of global warming, we know we have to leave 80% of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground. ‘Argument 2’ says (translation) "Therefore it makes economic sense to sell such shares as quickly as possible (before the market clocks on).”

The group’s secondary aim is for politicians and the German Government to become a strong advocate for progress on climate action – as well as divestment. Indeed, one US study found that statements by national politicians have a greater impact on public opinion on climate change than advocacy campaigns or extreme weather events (Corner, 2013, p. 8). Changing the hearts and minds of MPs using intrinsic messages could convert them into climate campaigners, whereas a focus on extrinsic arguments may lead MPs to re-evaluate the economic merits of each divestment campaign on a case-by-case basis. FFB could seek to leverage issues associated with climate change to develop extrinsic framings, such as community wellbeing and public health.
Audience: engaging the centre-right

Climate change faces an ideological divide – it is perceived by many as a fringe issue of the Left (Corner, 2013, p.3), and climate sceptics are generally found on the Right. Politicization of the issue concerns the “suppression and/or amplification of climate science by special interests for political reasons in combination with the alignment of attitudes... with existing ideological and partisan divisions (Pepermans and Maeelele, 2016, p. 479).” Anecdotally, left wing audiences appear more receptive of the Divestment Movement’s messages, and make up the majority of its activists. Yet, as the upcoming campaign’s main audiences (MPs and the general public) represent a spectrum of political views, it is important to understand how to frame climate messages to positively engage the centre-right.

Reframing climate change is not a rebranding exercise, “it means beginning a meaningful conversation with citizens on the centre-right about what climate change means to them, and how they think society should respond to it (Corner, 2013, p. 6).” Based on the above insights, to elicit sustained support from the centre-right, the group should identify and appeal to right-wing intrinsic values. Corner (2013, p.12) suggests those relevant to climate change include: intergenerational duty; community and family well-being; stewardship of the environment; and shared responsibility. For the Right to act on climate change, they must not only perceive climate change as a threat to their most sacred values, but feel that taking action reinforces their core identity – makes them feel more of who they are.

Group discussion and next steps

I emailed the findings from Cycle 1 to the group as a written briefing and presented them at the end of the following week’s two-hour meeting. Meetings generally overrun, as there are always plenty of issues to discuss. The chair allotted me 10 minutes to speak. I read through the research at speed, inviting people to jump in at points that
interested them, ask questions, or suggest exploring specific insights in
greater depth. I felt rushed to get all the main ideas across in the time,
and worried that people would be too tired after a long meeting to
absorb so much information.

It was heartening to see the group was very interested in what I had
found out, especially the ideas on how to engage the centre-right.
Several people at the meeting were knowledgeable about the topic,
which sparked a lively discussion. Christoph, who attends every
meeting and describes political campaigning is his ‘hobby’, said that he
was interested in the idea of intergenerational duty and wanted to run
his own workshop on the subject.

Mona asked about the use of specific words, adding that the group may
“still use words we’re not meant to say” – unthinkingly reinforcing
damaging misconceptions about the problem. She singled out the term
‘climate change’, which the group uses unquestioningly. “This is not
helpful, as things change all the time. Is crisis too big a word? How are
the words we use seen by different people?”

Mathias responded that “the same word can trigger different reactions
in different people – it’s almost impossible to use the right word, it boils
down to the audience.” Christoph added that it would be “good to get
people in a room and see how they react to certain words.” I agreed that
a focus group would be a great idea, but that we need to develop
messages before we can test them. I hope to take this forward after the
degree project is finalised.

For the next research cycle, I agreed to look at the use of words as well
as how we positively engage different audiences on climate change.
Cycle 2 – language and psychology

Literature review

Words and metaphors

In a split sample survey in the UK, the term ‘climate change’ was found to evoke less concern than ‘global warming’ (Fløttum, 2016, p. 3), but it also engendered a greater confidence in climate science. Nonetheless, climate change is a problematic term, because the climate has always changed, shifting through ‘hothouse’ and ‘snowball’ Earth over millennia. This gives sceptics space to dismiss anthropogenic climate change as natural, and vested interests the opportunity to delay action, as the issue is perceived as ‘non-urgent’, despite the incredible (and dangerous) differential in the rate of change. The fact that future ice ages are predicted, and cold weather snaps continue to occur, further problematizes the phrase ‘global warming’.

Alternatives terms such as ‘climate chaos,’ and ‘climate disruption’ are occasionally used to emphasise the threat of climate impacts. Stuart Hall (2013, p.3) said, meaning is not only determined by the intention of the sender, it is also manufactured in the minds of the recipient, for whom the same words and images may have different representations and symbolism. To an activist, disruptive language may be motivational, but to a sceptic, such terms could appear exaggerated. Through confirmation bias and biased assimilation (Marshall, 2014, p. 14), people who deny the existence of climate change could perceive alarmist language as yet more evidence of a leftist conspiracy to centralise control and increase taxes. If people do not buy into the concept of climate change – or are not prompted to challenge their assumptions – changing two words is unlikely to make a difference.

Nevertheless, avoiding misleading or confusing language would seem a prudent step. The ‘climate debate’ – itself an equivocal term – is littered with caveats, as much of the information originates from the constantly questioning field of science. Instead of saying “human activity contributes to global warming,”
climate communicators could with comparable confidence say “we know most warming is caused by people (Hassol, 2008, p.106).” Likewise, the scientific term ‘uncertainty,’ often used in connection with climate change, may be interpreted by lay public as meaning ‘unsure’ or ‘unlikely,’ whereas it refers to a range of possibilities. As Corner (2014) suggests in a blog, FFB could switch to more recognisable and relatable language to help audiences connect climate change to their lived experience; instead of ‘rising seas’ we might talk about ‘more floods,’ instead of ‘greenhouse gas emissions,’ we could simply say ‘pollution’.

Alongside the use of relatable language, storytelling can reframe climate change to make it more acceptable, relevant, and engaging for different audiences. “Carefully researched metaphors, allusions, and examples that trigger a new way of thinking about the personal relevance of climate change” can be used to bypass “barriers of human nature, partisan identity, and media fragmentation (Nisbet, 2009, p. 15).” Nerlich, Kotevyko, and Brown (2010, p. 104) suggest countering the “the climate has always changed” narrative with a story: just because lightning has always caused forest fires, it does not mean they cannot also be caused by a careless camper. Hassol (2008, p.106) suggests a metaphor for those who argue that we “can’t predict the weather in two weeks, how do you know the climate is changing?” An everyday activity neatly illustrates the difference between climate and weather: if you heat some water, you can’t predict each bubble, but you can say with some certainty the water will boil in 10 minutes.

**Psychological distance**

In addition to the use of scientific language, climate communications often contain abstract graphs, 100 year warnings, and a focus on environmental impacts over human costs. This creates a psychological distance between people’s daily lives and concerns, and the risks posed by climate change – a sense that it “won’t affect people like me.” Psychological distance also puts the situation for people living in climate vulnerable countries out of sight and out of
mind, diminishing the moral responsibility of industrial countries (the primary instigators of climate change) like Germany to act.

One way to reduce psychological distance is to talk about local/human climate impacts relevant to the audience. Climate change is not likely to strongly affect Germany, although agriculture in the East and regions that depend on winter tourism may be affected by higher temperatures (Steentjes et al., 2017, p. 9). Research has linked the conflict in Syria with climate change (Kelley et al. 2014), and therefore arguments could be made about the large number of Syrian refugees currently living in the country. However, this could be a risky tactic, as it may be exploited by the far-right to the detriment of refugees.

31% of Germans think their country will experience more storms and floods as a result of climate change, 29% foresee unpredictable weather, and 24% refer to droughts and heat waves (Steentjes et al., 2017, p. 6). It may be effective therefore for FFB to link climate change to Germany’s 2002 floods. For example, providing a platform for people affected by the floods to talk about how climate change has impacted their lives. Another approach might be to localise the solution, and highlight community-based action to safeguard the local environment by fighting climate change.

**Social norms and messengers**

Marshall finds that adhering to social norms is a “strong behavioural instinct built into our core psychology (2014, p. 27),” so strong in fact that people will follow the crowd in the face of a direct threat to their own personal safety. In terms of climate change, we look for cues from the people around us to gauge how to respond to the issue, setting ourselves rules about what is socially accepted and appropriate (Marshall, 2014, p. 27). Furthermore, if information appears to contradict or attack our social group’s values (i.e. suggests they are bad people), we may not only reject it, but actively advocate in the opposite direction.
Social norms can be leveraged by communication practitioners by positioning sustainable behaviour as the norm. In an experiment in the US, hotel guests were given different messages to encourage the reuse of towels. By far the most successful message was that “75% of guests reused towels to help save the environment (Marshall, 2014, p. 29).” As more and more authorities and organisations divest from fossil fuels, FFB can work to create the impression that this action is the norm in order to influence others. Furthermore, making investments in fossil fuels appear no longer socially acceptable (i.e. out-dated, embarrassing or shameful) could leverage social pressure to powerful effect. An anecdotal example of this is the changes in behaviour that resulted from the stigmatisation of not disposing of dog mess while walking your dog.

Social norms also mean that we accept information with a higher level of trust if it is delivered by respected messengers from within our peer group. In a radio interview (Bowlby, 2012), Dan Kahan said that we pick and choose our experts according to whose opinions correlates with our social group – and that this can magnify opinions and contribute to polarisation. This effect can also be leveraged in environmental communication to change the behaviour of specific groups. An example of this is the so-called ‘Attenborough effect’ (Cheung, 2018). Naturalist David Attenborough called for action on plastic after his wildlife programme Blue Planet II, the most watched TV programme in the UK in 2017, depicted the devastating impact of plastic on marine life.

Attenborough is considered a ‘national treasure’ in the UK. He appears apolitical, appealing to both Left and Right audiences. Not only was there a marked increase in public interest in plastic recycling – searches went up by 55% after the show aired (Cheung, 2018) – but the conservative Prime Minister Theresa May called the programme “public service broadcasting at its finest” in her speech announcing a “25 year environment plan for England (May, 2018)” that included a host of measures to reduce plastic waste. FFB could generate similar support for divestment by recruiting Germany’s equivalent of David Attenborough to act as a campaign ambassador. One group member suggested
Günther Jauch, a respected German TV personality with left and right appeal, and the recent voice of nature programme ‘Unsere Erde 2’.

**Group discussion and next steps**

After I presented the next round of findings, Nickolas, a first time FFB attendee, raised the question of how the campaign could reach people on lower incomes. Mathias suggested it would be helpful at this stage to learn from another group’s experience to get some practical tips for our own upcoming campaign. He said he knew someone at Divest Parliament in the UK, a similar campaign which also targets MPs and the general public, and offered to put me in touch. I agreed, and set up a Skype interview with the Campaign Manager Tytus Murphy.

**Cycle 3 – insights from Divest Parliament UK**

**Interview with Tytus Murphy**

*The interview with Divest Parliament UK resulted with the following key learnings pertinent to FFB’s campaign. Some insights support or contradict findings from the literature review, and have subsequently been analysed.*

**Tailor messages for MPs**

Tytus finds a one-size-fits-all approach counterproductive when speaking with MPs, as climate justice resonates with the left party (Labour), while the centre-right party (the Conservatives) responds more to economic arguments: “You need to engage MPs individually, speak their language and understand the political context.” This was certainly supported in the literature, which finds a stark divide between Left and Right in terms of belief in climate science and policy solution preference, and that different framings can make the same information more or less acceptable. However, Tytus also stressed the importance of financial arguments when speaking with all MPs: “We use the
language of the market; climate risks, stranded assets. When it comes to pushing for support, you have to lean heavily on the economics.”

This appears to contradict research in ‘Cycle 1’ on economic frames, which finds that a focus on extrinsic values is less likely to lead to sustainable change. Maintaining momentum on climate action is key, as it is a long-term ‘creeping’ problem that is subject to desensitisation and issue fatigue. However, in the case of FFB, working to convert MPs who only buy into the economic (and not the moral) argument into climate activists appears unrealistic. In a practical sense, if even short-term support of such MPs contributes to the primary aim of winning the campaign, then it would seem worthwhile – a victory through any means would send a clear signal to other governments and could be leveraged for future campaigning.

Tytus found achieving ‘critical mass’ of support to be highly important: “the more MPs get involved, especially from same party, the more others will follow. We try and focus on momentum, to get more and more MPs signing.” This was borne out in the literature, which states that creating a sense that something is the norm is highly influential, especially if it is perceived as the norm within your social group. Furthermore, in Tytus’ experience, showing a broad cross-section of support is key for MPs, as they are meant to represent the collective interest: “Get a group of people with different backgrounds to meet with their MP together. A big thing for us is that people are calling for this, that it is constituent-led.”

Tytus also highlighted the importance of the messenger. He found that when talking to MPs, messages are seen as credible if they come from peers with status and leverage: “This means taking quotes, evidence and examples to MPs from people they respect.” Expert selection and the importance of choosing the right messenger was also substantiated in the literature. Tytus also described how the UK campaign made a conscious effort to reach out to centre-right regions connected with green issues. Interestingly, Tytus highlighted evidence, rather than the right spokesperson delivering the message. FFB could tap into this by
collating and disseminating quotes from respected high-profile individuals respected by CDU (Christian Democrat) MPs, or those with cross-party appeal.

Mock up of possible shareable asset FFB could use for social media, featuring quote [my translation] from a messenger with universal, cross-party appeal in Germany (Günther Jauch, suggested in Cycle 2) taken from an online article (Stosch, 2018)

Tytus recommended communicating the severity of the problem in a delicate way: “If someone is conservative, an alarmist approach will disengage them. Communicate climate impacts in a way that isn’t so over the top.” Nisbet agrees that alarmist messages can be counterproductive, as it “plays into the hands of climate sceptics and further reinforces the partisan divide in climate change perceptions.” He adds that audiences also “translate these appeals to fear into a sense of fatalism (2009, p.19),” which can lead to inaction.

Instead of focusing on climate impacts, Tytus suggests taking a non-accusatory approach that highlights policy inconsistency: “position divestment as very much
in keeping with what Germany has been doing for a long time. Don't talk about hypocrisy, say inconsistency. Talk about continuity; divestment isn't radical, it is merely accelerating change along our pre-agreed path. Revolutionary change unsettles people on the right, they prefer slow progress.” Jonathan Haidt’s (2008) research on conservative morals validates this idea. It finds that liberals score highly on the values ‘harm/care’ and ‘fairness/reciprocity,’ but score much lower on ‘in-group/loyalty,’ ‘authority/respect’ and ‘purity/sanctity’ than conservatives. This means liberals will risk chaos for social justice, whereas conservatives want order – even if this comes at a cost to certain out-group individuals.

Haidt believes this creates a natural balance between progress and stability, and therefore to push for social progress, it is necessary to acknowledge the Right’s values. Labelling the other side as stupid, evil, or ‘hypocritical’ does not work, as “everybody thinks they’re right (Haidt, 2008).” Tytus’ suggestion of talking about continuity also fits in with conservative values around conservation and preservation. It makes what could be perceived as a radical, anti-establishment move seem an extension of the status quo. FFB has plenty of opportunity to talk about inconsistency, as investing in fossil fuels is inconsistent with the spirit of the Paris Agreement on climate change, to which Germany is a signatory, and its G7 commitments to end fossil fuel subsidies by 2025 (Mathiesen 2016).

Tytus said that movement building was important for gaining support throughout the country: “our mailing list is patchy, 10,000 in London, but only 100 in Liverpool. We have to go out to the cities and do movement building. We’re trying to move away from working with local divestment groups to partner with transition-town groups in middle England.” Moser suggests for the climate movement to break out of its niche, leftist silos it must “connect to other social movements, and embrace, integrate and collaborate (not subsume!) those whose work focuses on sustainability more broadly (2016, p. 352).”

Tytus felt that climate change was primarily “a concern of the white middle-class” in the UK, which was also a flaw of the Divestment Movement: “We will
never satisfactorily engage these groups unless we do it in a big picture way – we should talk about how fossil fuel companies drive fuel poverty, and hold back cheap, green, community-owned energy.” This was insightful in response to Nickolas’ question, but despite Tytus describing this work as ‘worthwhile,’ engaging working class audiences is at present a small, albeit aspirational aspect of the UK campaign. With limited resources, FFB will likely have to continue to prioritise the ‘low hanging fruits’ of the politically empowered middle class in order to achieve rapid results. However, to fully achieve mainstream appeal, FBB should begin taking steps towards recruiting and engaging a broader cross-section of society.

**Group discussion and next steps**

I received lots of fantastic feedback from the group after sharing Tytus’ recommendations with the group, including an email from Mathias: “My comment is ‘WOW’. What a super-useful, thought-through, condensed collection of advice. This will bring our campaign to the next level.” At the following meeting we discussed where the research could go next. People felt that the information on conservatives and liberals was highly interesting, as securing support of CDU (Germany’s centre-right party) MPs would be one of the campaign’s main challenges.

Christoph asked how we might apply these insights to the campaign – was there a way to find common ground between Left and Right? Can we create a moment of unity, similar to the shared commitment under the Paris Agreement? Was there something that united politicians from all parties? Reemt, an infrequent group attendee, suggested it would be good to connect to other topics, such as health. I added that the Germany identity could be something that links all politicians, and that this had been supported by some of my readings and the interview with Tytus. I agreed to conduct more desk research to find out.
Cycle 4

Literature review

Common ground

In his interview, Tytus said: “We try to emphasis leadership in the UK. Germany's role as a global leader on climate change, at least in terms of renewables, is important. The German campaign should talk about political leadership, German identity, and leading the transition to a green future.” This point on national identity could be one route to finding common ground on climate change. As we have seen, people take cues from their social group (in this case their nation) to ascertain the appropriate response to a particular issue. Therefore, if we can present acting on climate change as integral to an in-group identity both Left and Right share – i.e. ‘Germanness’ – we can engender a sense of pride in caring about the environment. For example, the German public are proud of their leadership and achievements in recycling, and tend to expect fellow citizens to do their share.

Steentjes et al (2017, p. 23) state that if a country has a sustainable image, this can impact public support for environmental policies. Their survey of European perceptions on climate change find that 44% of Germans think being environmentally friendly is an important part of their national identity (2017, p. 23). FFB could work to increase this percentage, highlighting Germany's achievements in this area to reinforce the idea that to be German is to care about climate change. Politicians are likely to respond favourable to patriotic messaging, however, it may not be a wholly inclusive approach for targeting a multicultural general public, which contains an array of competing identities.

Marshall finds that not only do we seek to establish a kinship with our in-group, we also seek to distance ourselves from the out-group. In one UK experiment (2014, p. 33), British people showed less interest in energy conservation when comparing themselves to Swedish people (who are perceived as environmentally conscientious) and more interest when comparing themselves to Americans
(who are seen as being profligate with energy). FFB could further contrast Germany’s climate achievements with the relative inaction of countries, such as the US, to bolster a sense of competitive pride.

Yet, if FFB is not perceived as part of an audience’s in-group, its messages will likely be ignored. Group members could circumvent such barriers by identifying areas of genuine common interest that they share with certain sub-sections of the public audience, such as being a parent, a fisher, a skier, or an asthma sufferer (Hayhoe, 2017). This not only creates a sense of shared identity, it offers a framing to present climate impacts in a relatable way to audiences. In addition to gathering quotes or recruiting in-group spokespeople to convey messages, FFB members could approach select sub-audiences on a human level, not as a ‘left-wing campaign group.’ This may enable the group to build alliances and grow the movement beyond narrowly focused environmental groups, for example, with mum’s groups, or fishing unions.

**Building consensus and depoliticisation**

Pepermans and Maeseele identify and critique numerous approaches currently employed in an attempt to build consensus on climate change. These include reframing information according to the needs of the audiences “to make it more congruent with hierarchical-individualist, materialist values (2016, p. 479),” such as identifying more acceptable policy options like geo-engineering and carbon capture and storage. They find such approaches to consensus politics to be acceptable (if not desirable), so long as they does not conceal disagreements or fail to recognise that there is more than one way to conceive of society. However, even if consensus is reached, antagonism is generally turned into ‘agonism’ – a truce that both parties “go along with” until a point in the future when they have the opportunity to challenge the decision (2016, p.482).

Working towards a policy consensus and attempting to cover over political difference risks depoliticising climate change, which Pepermans and Maeseele suggest shifts the argument into disagreements between ‘science’ and ‘politics,’
or ‘realism’ and ‘radicalism’ (2016, P.482). They add that depoliticisation impedes democratic debate on solutions outside the global neoliberal world order. Although FFB’s approach argues within a capitalist framework (i.e. the risks associated with investing in potentially stranded assets), the group’s aims are explicitly political, and include radical calls for systems change. It may therefore be counterproductive to attempt to work towards consensus politics. Furthermore, Pepermans and Maeseele find depoliticisation “encourages either polarization between acceptance and denial or political apathy by alienating people from owning the issue (2016, p.480).” This would run counter to the group’s goal of encouraging political engagement and building a movement.

Climate justice or post-carbon discourses in the mainstream public sphere “are either ignored, emptied of their content or blatantly delegitimized (Pepermans and Maeseele, 2016, p. 482).” In a climate where alternatives to the structures that caused (and have failed to halt) climate change are marginalised, repoliticisation of the issue may be required to revive democratic debate. This could be stimulated by presenting the issue as a choice between competing pathways; shifting the debate from a focus on climate impacts and individual wrongdoers, to how society might be reshaped to realise alternative visions of the future. This would require challenging dominant discourses, such as carbon trading and green growth (and indeed endless economic growth) to discuss the merits of more radical alternatives.

**Group discussion and next steps**

I emailed the briefing on ‘finding a common ground’ feeling undecided if it was a good or bad idea. At the next meeting, the general feeling was that enough information had been gathered to start to put together a strategy document to help guide the group’s public relations work. Mathias felt some of this work had already been done, and information on this could be found in existing documents. Some others felt unclear about group communications and wanted to start with climate and divestment narratives, and look at whether new approaches could be
developed based on the insights in this study. Meike, who has a background in communications, felt the aspect of psychology should be explored more fully, saying it was “too late to be pessimistic”.

A date for the workshop was agreed with members of FFB’s communication subgroup (five members including me). I offered to facilitate the workshop. The main group requested that the subgroup look at how to target specific audiences in the workshop, specifically politicians from all parties, journalists, pension recipients, and concerned general public.

The workshop will also explore questions relevant to the current campaign, including the main arguments relevant to the pension funds for judges, soldiers and office workers targeted by the upcoming campaign. Is there a way we can link pensions to climate impacts? Do we need to revise our current taglines developed for the previous local government campaign? This work is ongoing and beyond the scope of this study, but will hopefully build on the learnings in this paper and be more evidence-based.

**Conclusion**

Communications is not an exact science, and some of the findings in this report were contradictory or not entirely relevant to the German context. Therefore the results cannot be taken as conclusive proof that one approach will be more effective than another. They do, however, provide evidence-based insights applicable to real-world contexts that could be trialled and tested by FFB and communication practitioners as part of an ongoing conversation about what works. Here follows a summary of reports key findings and recommendations to feed into the development of FFB’s communication strategy:

Climate change has become more than a physical phenomenon; meeting this immense challenge in time is a matter of winning the battle of words and ideas. A
perfect storm of psychological and ideological barriers is compounded by ineffective communication approaches, resulting in insufficient public engagement and political will for climate action. Although climate communication research has made strides in recent years, a research-practice gap exists. Climate communications are therefore generally not evidence-based and in some instances could be doing more harm than good.

Climate change has been politicised, and risks becoming an ‘ideological football’ in polarising contexts, such as in Germany. All people interpret meaning via culturally transmitted values and cross-check appropriate responses to issues against the words and actions of their social group. This can result in Left and Right audiences having different interpretations and reactions to the same climate messages. Sceptics (generally on the Right) may even reject compelling scientific evidence, if it does not subscribe to their worldview.

Adopting frames appropriate to audiences and targeting intrinsic values can diminish extrinsic values and lead to sustainable changes in attitude and behaviour. Whereas targeting extrinsic framings may result in fatalistic responses and cause people to externalise solutions. Social norms have a powerful influence, but can be leveraged to counter the polarising effect of in-group mentality; the selection of appropriate messengers and quotes from respected peers being key to the acceptability of information.

Although misleading and confusing language may be unhelpful, addressing the larger problem of whether an audience finds the concept of climate change compatible with their belief-system and peer-group appears more significant. Psychological distance makes climate change appear far off in space and time, and irrelevant to “people like me.” This allows people to diminish climate threats and put current climate impacts out of mind. The use of accessible metaphors and positive storytelling could offer an effective route to making climate change appear closer, urgent and relatable – and result in action if combined with actionable routes to change.
Promoting political consensus on climate solutions may be desirable, so long as it does not paper over disagreements and shut down debates outside neoliberal, capitalist framings, such as alternative visions for the reorganisation of society. The diminishment of political difference risks depoliticizing the issue, resulting in polarisation and apathy. Repoliticisation of climate change could help revive democratic debate and challenge dominant discourses, such as the focus on economic growth and the marketization of pollution.

Next steps and future research

The next steps (beyond the scope of this degree project) will be for FFB to write a communications strategy based on the planned workshop and insights from this report, and ultimately develop more evidence-based messages, campaigns and communication products to achieve its stated aims. I also intend to create communication materials (blogs, videos, social media assets etc.) to share learnings from this project with similar campaign groups and signpost how to access this report. If the findings from this study prove beneficial, the group could consider follow up research on areas such as: how to communicate in a fragmented/polarized context; how to move people from awareness to action; how to achieve sustained engagement of audiences; and how to bridge the gap between climate communication research and practice.

Recommendations for FFB

FFB should reflect on how to balance the necessary use of extrinsic, economic arguments, with the benefits of intrinsic messaging that promote sustainable behaviour change; and the promotion of consensus politics and non-confrontational campaigning, with the desire to repoliticise climate change, stimulate debate and be inclusive of radical solutions. In so doing, the strategy should consider FFB’s organisational positioning and image; is it a mainstream, non-radical, capitalist-friendly group changing the system from within, or a political agitator calling for systems change? I would suggest it is both and
should continue to occupy a grey space in the middle, communicating different messages to different audiences. It could also manage such dichotomies by providing a platform for radically different voices to come together and cooperate, without necessarily sharing the same opinion.

Key recommendations include:

• Research relevant supportive statements by high-profile and respected individuals appropriate for each audience group to create a bank of compelling evidence. Based on these insights, approach ‘unlikely’ supporters with centre-right or universal appeal to act as campaign spokespeople.

• The Divestment Movement is not inclusive of people from different backgrounds. This can be seen in FFB’s own demographics. Developing a long-term strategy to recruit working-class and minority members would increase diversity, and in time would facilitate the development of new campaigns targeting an array of audiences, helping to mainstream FFB’s appeal.

• Research evidence, tell stories, and provide a voice/platform for people/testimonials that bring the risks and impacts of climate change down to the local level (i.e. could the price of beer in Berlin be affected by climate change?), presenting relatable, human costs (i.e. portraits of victims of the 2002 floods in Germany), and highlighting positive stories of local people restoring the environment or creating change.

• Work to build a larger movement with likeminded groups and unexpected allies to broaden FFB’s appeal, identifying genuine areas of shared interest to build partnerships with multipliers trusted by hard to reach audiences (i.e. fishing unions) to disseminate FFB messages.

• Consider linking climate action to the German identity, to leverage patriotism and create a sense of competitive national pride. Present Divestment and climate action as the norm for sensible, forward looking organisations, and consider naming and shaming so-called ethical organisations for failing to Divest.
Personal reflections

I feel I’ve learned a lot about myself through conducting this study. I realise I may have been too quick to dismiss the opinions of right-wing people as selfish or immoral, contributing to an unhelpful ‘them against us’ narrative. As a communications professional, it’s my job to try and reach different audience, not blame them. I have also reconsidered my assumption that working towards consensus is necessarily a good idea – although we must move beyond arguing about the existence of climate change and encourage a lively debate on different policy solutions. I was also struck by the idea that the choice of words may be less important that I had thought (good to know as a writer) – that the stories we tell ourselves are more powerful.

In terms of my own personal and professional growth, having worked in climate change communication for many years, I have found it enormously gratifying to be able to take time out to examine my own assumptions and working practices and ask the question – am I doing this right? I am now highly motivated to find new ways to approach climate communications, and speak to colleagues about developing best practice.
References


Appendices

Annex 1: Cycle 1 Research Update

Update on Action Research

21 March 2018

Engaging the centre-right

*Rationale – important to engage with a spectrum of political views when targeting MPs or mainstream public audiences*

- Need to drop language of environmentalism to engage centre-right (too fringe) – need something everyone has a stake in
- Apocalyptic/sacrifice messages don't work – need to focus on how cc will impact the way we travel, eat, and live
- US study finds statements by national politicians has greater impact on public opinion than advocacy campaigns or extreme weather
- Neoliberals who object to big govt. or regulations deny climate change because they dislike the policy outcomes, which leads them to downplay the problem (i.e. climate science is value neutral, solutions are not)
- Facts are not self-evident, they are filtered through people's value systems/ideologies – we more readily accept facts that fit with our worldview
- Key right-wing media narratives (UK): cost of action unreasonable; RE threatens countryside; tackling climate change conflicts with economic growth
• Reframe to fit extrinsic right-wing values: intergenerational duty; preserving cultural heritage; community well-being; stewardship of the environment; shared responsibility

Certain values are associated with each other, others are opposed (see wheel right). Focusing on one set of values diminishes the importance of others (at least temporarily). Targeting intrinsic values (i.e. altruism) results in more sustainable behaviour change. For example, presenting an argument in economic terms (a conservation, self-enhancement value) is unlikely to lead to long-term meaningful engagement (cost argument needs to be won again and again for each case because people haven’t really bought into the problem of cc). People also have fatalistic response to extrinsic framing (i.e. powerless to change) or externalise the solution (government responsibility). Appealing to intrinsic values is more empowering and motivates people to act.

Localism

• Reduce the psychological distance between people and climate impacts (i.e. time, distance, doesn’t effect ‘people like me’ – victims out of sight)
• Offer localised approaches and solutions
• Show community-based action

Energy Security

• Right likes idea of energy independence – sell renewables as secure, clean, safe, reliable (irrespective of whether ppl. believe in cc.)
• Increases resilience/reduces risks
• Offers new era of home-grown manufacturing
• WARNING – security argument also used by frackers and can have nationalistic undertones

Health/well-being

People respond to messages about pollution and purity, make it relatable:
• Hayfever/air quality/public health
• Heatwaves, hosepipe bans
• Flooded homes

Social norms

• Make things not socially acceptable (i.e. driving a landrover)
• Communicate sustainable behaviour as the norm (i.e. most hotel guests re-use towels an effective message)
• Needs to be relevant to peer group (i.e. would listen to orgs like the National Trust in the UK)

NB. Nowadays, may be more about cosmopolitan/communitarian divide than traditional left/right lines

Climate change frames

• Frames are interpretive storylines that communicate why something is a problem, who/what should be responsible, what should be done about it
• We all make sense of information through filters of culturally transmitted values – this is inescapable
• Pandora’s box looming climate crisis can be seen as liberal alarmism and generates sense of fatalism
• Public accountability (i.e. getting sued for causing climate change) frame can be seen as elite – might work with MPs?
• Morality and ethics – cc. as solvable and shared moral challenge (i.e. creating the NHS in the UK after WWII despite lack of money) – Pope’s 2015 speech on cc.


Update on Action Research
11 April 2018

Interview with Tytus Murphy, Divest Parliament UK

• **One size fits all approach is counter productive**, speaking about climate justice and impacts resonates with the labour Party (left), a more business/economics, stranded assets approach resonates with the Tories (centre-right). A key part of our learning is to engage MPs individually, speak their language and understand the political context. When you’re looking up members of the Bundestag – some will be locally focused and are in politics to help their community. More aspirational MPs are looking to land a top position in government, they might be more into ego stuff. You really have to treat everyone of these targets as humans – to speak individually to these people as possible. Taking local, customised approach. Tailoring your messaging to MPs, the financial stuff will resonate with them. We use the language of the market, climate risk, stranded assets – they work in capitalist countries. When it comes to pushing and getting support, might have to lean more heavily on the economics.

• **Push emotional buttons**. MPs are human beings and there will be things they care about. There are many aspects of climate change, so you need to find the right emotional button to push to build a constructive relationship. We haven’t found a common thing that pushes all buttons.
Although most people recognise that flooding in the UK is exacerbated by climate change. The divest NY campaign, strong emotional connect to storm sandy, which creates moral urgency.

- **Critical mass is important.** The more MPs get involved (especially from same party), the more others will follow. We try and focus on momentum, to get more and more MPs signing, hyping it up, showing there is more and more political support for keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

- **Messenger is important.** Need to present credible messages from different people with status and leverage. This means taking quotes/evidence/examples to MPs from people they respect.

- **Getting constituents to campaign.** Issue of representation is important. MPs are meant to represent the collective interest, so show broad cross-section of support. Get a group of people with different backgrounds to meet with their MP together. A big thing for us is that people are calling for this, that it is constituent-led.

- **How to talk about climate justice.** High consuming economies like Germany bear responsibility for the impacts of climate change, but communicate the severity of this in a delicate way. If someone is conservative, an alarmist approach will disengage them. Communicate climate impacts in a way that isn’t so over the top.

- **Showing leadership.** Germany’s role as a global leader (at least on the surface) is important (renewables etc.), we try to emphasis this a lot in the UK. The German campaign should talk about political leadership, German identity, leading the transition to a green future. Secondary messages on climate risks.

- **Consistency and continuity.** Consistency is an important word that resonates with MPs. Position divestment as very much in keeping with what Germany has been doing for a long time. Show that it fits in with commitments (party manifestos, Paris Agreement, Climate Change Act) and what we're doing already. We don't say hypocrisy, we say “inconsistency” – 5 of the top 20 pension investments are in fossil fuel companies, while we put ourselves on a pedestal as climate leaders. It is incompatible, but we say that very delicately. Talk about continuity;
divestment isn't radical, it is merely accelerating change along our pre-agreed path. Revolutionary change unsettles people on the right, they prefer slow progress.

- **Working with campaign groups.** Most of our supporters are left-wing activists, but we've made a conscious effort in the last few months to reach out to centre-right regions connected with green issues. We are working to win over conservative MPs in critical areas to reach a critical mass of conservatives of around 10-15. We try to bring the campaign to local 'green' groups who do green stuff and present it as empowering.

- **We don't talk about reinvestment,** because we run out of space to get everything in. This is a very symbolic campaign, it's not a huge amount of money. While reinvesting in clean energy is important, the sums are small... it's more about stigmatising the fossil fuel industry. Our focus is on leadership, consistency, economic ramifications.

- **How to research MPs.** Short answer: look at Twitter. Before you write to or meet MP, look at their twitter feed to see who they are – we use theyworkforyou.com website in the UK which tracks MPs voting record.

- **How to change MPs minds.** We're finding there are two ways – lots of constituents writing to them (email campaign with postcode), which leads to a response. Or you have a constructive conversation, a group in the constituents goes and meets and pushes them on the issue in a mindful way. Events are also good, doing a local event with them is a great way to start that dialogue – in-person contact is important.

- **Movement building.** Our mailing list is patchy, 10k in London, but only 100 in Liverpool. We have to go out to the cities and do movement building. We're trying to move away from working with local divestment groups, working in middle England with “transition-town groups” - groups where people try and take more ownership of their local environment. We find groups that share a similar worldview, but acts in a similar way. We work with anti-coal, and anti-fracking groups.

- **Engaging working class audiences.** I understand poor people are focused on survival. Climate change seems a concern of the white middle class. This is where I feel divestment is very flawed – we will never
satisfactorily engage groups unless we do it in a bigger picture way – fuel poverty, pollution – work with trade unions to push broader green initiatives. That is the most effective way to engage those audiences. We are setting up a project working with charity working with skill shares with disadvantaged young people, getting them to go in and speak about this issue. Issues of class – climate justice lenses, impacted communities in- Bangladeshi communities in London. Spend time to build relationships with people for events. The language that we use, the theory of change, it doesn’t resonate with poor people. It’s worthwhile trying to do it, but through issues that they care about – i.e. fossil fuel companies are driving fuel poverty – holding back cheap, green affordable, community-owned energy.