**Winning public arguments as ecologists: time for a new doctrine?**

***Abstract.*** *When we ecologists operate in the public sphere, we win arguments far less often than we should, given that the evidence is generally on our side. It is a mistake to respond with fuller, more patient explanations. Instead, we should adopt, and repeat, emotionally appealing catch phrases.*

**Will ecology lose its meaning?**

With the British Ecological Society bringing its Annual Meeting to Liverpool last December, I was asked, as an adopted local, to say some welcoming words, and then to go on to mark the 150th anniversary of Ernst Haeckel’s first coining of the word ‘ecology’. I said I would try to provoke some debate, and I will do the same here.

Plotting usage of the word “ecology” from its origins to the present day, I see it as now having two distinct meanings, though of course they are related. The first is ecology the fundamental science – “the study of the distribution and abundance of organisms”, as a working definition. But it is also the crisis discipline that we should be looking to if we are to have answers to some of the most profound problems facing us, now and in the years ahead.

This is the present situation. But we must also consider the future and whether ecology, in its sense as a crisis discipline, will have meaning at all. Might it instead become progressively disregarded at the very time it becomes increasingly crucial? My worry is that this is indeed the prospect facing us. If this happens, the fault will be ours. But a means to avoid this fate might lie in our abandoning some of our most deeply held principles.

When I said this in my short talk, some were kind enough to agree, but others were upset, and many weren’t really sure what I meant. So I will try to explain.

I base my fears for ecology’s impending loss of meaning on the lack of seriousness with which it is taken already. Of course, we have had our successes. We can take comfort in climate-change deniers now being in a relatively small minority. Marine Protected Areas have been established. Investments in renewable sources of energy are increasing. But progress is slow. Emissions targets, overly modest in the first place, seem certain to be beyond us, over-fishing continues, and concerns over biodiversity loss are too readily considered a luxury in the face of economic recession.

We are getting our messages across to some people, no doubt, and to some in power – but not to enough, and certainly not with enough urgency. To see why, we should begin by noting that we are not alone in our failure. Experts everywhere find themselves being disregarded. To take just one example: more than ninety percent of expert economists concluded that the UK would be substantially worse off as a result of Brexit, but many of the public chose to ignore them, following widely-publicised advice to ignore the experts in favour of a more seductive alternative. [1].

**Rationality? Or emotion?**

The central problem is that for us and for others, public opinion is being driven not by facts or rational argument – the truth – but by emotion, often manipulated emotion, and by what seems to be true or ought to be true. Apart, perhaps, from throwing up our arms in despair, our response to this has been simply to try that little bit harder, and with that little bit more patience, to explain the facts. We tell ourselves that if we keep faith in our ability to convey the truth, and in the ability of others to understand it, all will be right in the end. In doing this we may be making a fatal error.

George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist, has suggested in his book *The Political Mind*, and elsewhere, that the mistake we are making, along with other scientists and other experts generally, is to insist on seeing ourselves as the proud standard bearers of an intellectual tradition going back 300 years to The Enlightenment [2]. We are still hopelessly in love with rational argument, still seduced by its power. Since that is what changes our own minds, surely it is the best way to change the minds of others. Sadly, this is not so, according to Lakoff. Arguments in the public sphere are not won, and never will be won, by those with the best evidence, but by those who appeal most effectively to the emotions. And this is done by ‘framing’ those arguments in ‘metaphors’ that people already understand and relate to, and then repeating those framings again and again.

Lakoff’s ideas about framing in metaphors, which naturally have had their critics [3], can be understood most easily by seeing how he has applied them in the political arena, contrasting the metaphors of ‘the strict father’ and ‘the nurturant parent’ as models of government. In other words, people are invited to see governments either as something to be respected and obeyed because those governing them know best, or because the government is there to empower citizens while protecting them from harmful forces such as poverty. Contrasting metaphors with competing emotional pulls.

Indeed, Lakoff goes further. He argues that we should condense our complex lines of reasoning into sound-bites and repeat these at every opportunity. Because that, it seems, is how the brain works. We’ve seen it being effective for lies and distortions – “ We’ll have £350 million pounds a day to spend on the NHS!”, “Take back control!”, “Make America great again!”. There is no reason it shouldn’t be effective for the truth.

**Ecology framed in metaphors**

In our own sphere Lakoff has suggested we reject metaphors that see nature as a resource to be exploited or even an adversary to be conquered, and adopt those that see it as a sustainer and provider, inviting our gratitude and respect [4]. Surely we could do even better ourselves. I don’t have an off-the-shelf list, but the near-universal fascination with nature programmes on television gives us grounds for hoping that web-of-life metaphors will have widespread resonance. And if we were to focus on inter-generational justice, repeating "short term gains for us are less important than the long term future of our children and grandchildren", perhaps that would reflect a metaphor people can identify with: the caring, selfless parent. It would also pre-empt any opposition that stressed current, hard-headed gains, making them seem immediately selfish by comparison. The particular metaphors, however, are less important than the principle, that we try to construct short appealing phrases that encapsulate our arguments, rather then running through the arguments themselves.

The difficulty for us in adopting this new doctrine is that it is something we simply do not want to believe. It is bound to make us feel that we are patronizing the public, refusing to give them credit for being as swayed by rational argument as we are. Worse still, we will seem to ourselves to be sinking to the level of the reactionary, anti-rational forces that we wish to overcome. But to feel this way is our mistake. The supporters of those reactionary forces have realised, perhaps consciously, perhaps by intuition, that framing their arguments in appealing metaphors works, and they are using those framings in the service of misinformation and distortion. We must do with the truth what they are doing with lies.

When I spoke about this in Liverpool, I blurted out the phrase, ‘we must ditch the evidence’. That was possibly unwise. Let me explain what I meant. I certainly do not mean that we should be less evidence-focused than we have always been. Evidence, the facts, the truth as we see it, must be the basis of everything we say and do. But we must learn to use evidence as the justification for what we say, not as the substance of what we say. We have all heard interviews in which an industry representative and an expert ecologist are asked the same question. The industry representative keeps it simple, reels off a catch-phrase we have all heard before, and says we are all going to be worse off if we don’t back him or her. Then the ecologist counters with details, prudence, confidence intervals, and an admission of what we don’t yet know alongside what we do. If you hear that you know the ecologist is losing.

**Changing minds: altering moods**

I should explain, too, that I see a distinction between what one says in the truly public arena and how one behaves in direct interaction with policy makers. It may even be that within our ranks, some of us need to adapt to one niche and some to the other. With policy makers, it would be arrogant to pretend that we are the sole arbiters of 'the truth', and that the truth as we see it - or even an agreed truth - can ever be the only determinant of policy. Other political, social and economic realities (themselves also 'truths') must obviously be taken into account. On the other hand, when we speak to the public, either directly or through the media, the priority must be to set the public mood and the agenda. This is where we need simple truths rather than detailed arguments. What is more, our interaction with policy makers is itself likely to be driven by any influence we can have on the public mood, since it is the public mood that plays a major part in defining the prevailing political and social realities.

I cannot pretend that the world would certainly be saved if only we were to arm ourselves with metaphors. However, we should not imagine that if we just carry on as before, explaining patiently, maintaining our scientific integrity and proceeding with caution, then eventually everyone will see the light. We must at least re-consider the way we have been framing our arguments. We must abandon any feeling that behaving in the way we believe a scientist should behave is more important than achieving our desired outcome. We should use our expertise not in order to parade our expertise, but to devise, and then adopt, simple and repeatable messages that will change the way people think. Indeed, we should stop believing that it is notour role to change the way people think, but rather to give people the facts and let them make up their own minds. Believing this way is naïve, and our obsession with supposed integrity is self-indulgent.

I am sure Jonathan Freedland was speaking for many of us when he lamented the attacks on ‘liberality’ at the close of a dreadful 2016: “If liberal means holding true to the values of the Enlightenment, including a belief in [facts](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/16/not-post-truth-simpler-words-lies-aleppo-trump-mainstream) and evidence and reason, then call me a liberal” [5]. Well, you can call me a liberal too. But I also believe that we are going to have to learn not just to be liberals but to be effective liberals. And that means adopting a whole new doctrine whenever we present our public face.

1. <https://mainlymacro.blogspot.co.uk/2016/06/for-economists-project-fear-is-brexit.html>

2. Lakoff, G. (2009) The political mind: a cognitive scientist’s guide to your brain and its politics. Penguin Books, .

3. Pinker, S. (2006) Block that metaphor! New Republic, October 8, 2006.

4. http://www.alternet.org/environment/george-lakoff-why-pope-francis-killed-it-addressing-climate-change

5. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/23/dishonest-attacks-metropolitan-liberal-elite