

Found in Translation: Comedy in Sustainability Communication

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Sustainability communicators, who are attempting to ‘interrupt’ and shift the behaviour of large numbers of people in order to avert a number of serious and converging problems, might find the idea of using comedy in their work to be counter-intuitive.

Yet comedy is one of the most effective methods to capture people’s attention in a positive way. Consider climate change.

We’ve had the [Stern Report](#) into climate change – hands up, who read it all? All 700 pages of it?

The report was essential for policy making and presenting the business case for tackling climate change, but not so helpful for giving the issue traction in the wider community – which is where politicians will be given ‘permission’ to make those decisions.

We’ve had Al Gore’s important and timely documentary film, [An Inconvenient Truth](#), which – coming hot on the heels of the Hurricane Katrina disaster and The Stern Review – created a tipping point in climate awareness.

But are the full range of values captured in a documentary, even one that was able to breathe life and story into what was essentially a scientific Powerpoint presentation? Did it resonate with those who remain unconvinced, or unconcerned? There are still many people who are unshakeable in their belief that climate change is not real, and vehement in their denial.

Perhaps what we most need is a '[Monty Python](#)' approach to climate change, and sustainability in general? Having said that, it must be acknowledged that humour can be tricky and delicate to handle – writers will often say comedy is the hardest thing to write, because what one person finds funny, others will not, or will in a worst-case scenario, find offensive.

In 2010, the '[Cut Carbon: No Pressure](#)' climate campaign backfired spectacularly in the UK:

No Pressure is composed of scenes in which a variety of people in every-day situations are graphically blown to pieces for failing to be sufficiently enthusiastic about the 10:10 campaign to reduce CO2 emissions...The film was withdrawn from public circulation by 10:10, on the same day it was released, due to negative publicity. Charities that had backed the film stated they were "absolutely appalled" upon seeing it, and several of 10:10's corporate and strategic partners withdrew from partnership.

Being mindful of such learnings, and having been criticised for 'doomsday' messages, shock tactics and the use of fear and guilt, what if sustainability communicators were more often able to use appropriate humour?

Comedy For Change

In his [TED presentation](#), the marvellously-monikered [Chris Bliss](#) speaks of his journey of becoming a better communicator, and his discovery of comedy as an effective technique:

Comedy travels along a distinct wavelength from other forms of language. If I had to place it on an arbitrary spectrum, I'd say it falls somewhere between poetry and lies.

And I'm not talking about all comedy here, because clearly there's plenty of humour that colours safely within the lines of what we already think and feel.

What I want to talk about is the unique ability that the best comedy and satire has at circumventing our ingrained perspectives. Comedy as the philosopher's stone – that takes the base metal of our conventional wisdom and transforms it, through ridicule, into a different way of seeing, and ultimately being in the world.

By 'the best comedy and satire', Bliss means that which comes from a place of honesty and integrity. He cites [The Daily Show](#), a hugely popular current affairs/news parody fronted by Jon Stewart, as an example. The official site's headline reads 'Political Comedy – Fake News', although there is more than a kernel of truth in many of Stewart's mock news reports.

[Multiple surveys](#) have revealed that:

...Daily Show viewers are better informed about current events than the viewers of all major network and cable news shows. Now, whether that says more about the conflict between the integrity and profitability of corporate journalism than it does about the attentiveness of Stewart's viewers, the larger point remains that Stewart's material is always grounded in a commitment to the facts, not because his intent is to inform – it's not. His intent is to be funny. It just so happens that Stewart's brand of funny doesn't work unless the facts are true. And the result is great comedy, that's also an information delivery system that scores markedly higher in both credibility and retention than the professional news media.

Credibility? Retention of messages? Both are targets of sustainability communicators, and social change communicators in general. What could we learn from Jon Stewart and his contemporaries like [Stephen Colbert](#) of The Colbert Report?

The Physiology of Comedy in Communication

Yet comedy is not merely an intellectual technique – it also has a physiological advantage as a means of communication for change.

Bliss points out that laughter releases endorphins into the brain, which changes brain chemistry, and opens up the possibility of seeing things in a different way.

Comedy is a way of ‘reaching around people’s walls’, because those endorphins bring down the walls. This works in exactly the opposite way to anger, fear and panic – the fight or flight responses that release adrenalin, which raises our walls of self-defence. Through laughter, comedy enables us to question the validity of ours and others’ views on issues without becoming defensive.

And perhaps most critically, comedy is ‘inherently viral – people can’t wait to pass along that new great joke’.

Bliss notes:

When you put all of these elements together – when you get the viral appeal of a great joke, with a powerful punchline that’s crafted from honesty and integrity, it can have a real world impact at changing a conversation.

The use of comedy to perturb, disturb, puncture and parody social issues is not limited to new media. One of the best popular culture communicators at the intersection of sustainability and comedy is British author Ben Elton (co-writer of the cult BBC series *The Young Ones* and *Blackadder*). His novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s, [Stark](#), [Gridlock](#) and [This Other Eden](#) offered social commentary by weaving sustainability themes in and around stories populated with quirky characters, irony and wit. His books were best-sellers and sold millions of copies.

Comedy is an approach that must be utilised with caution and consideration – but done right, it can breach barriers that no other method can.

Have you ever used comedy in any of your communications approaches? Did you find it helped you further engage with your audience, or did you ‘misfire’?