



“Rapid facial mimicry is critical for an infant's development and attachment with the mother.”

Mary Bates, Ph.D.

Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.

by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

How to Rally Liberals and Conservatives to Environmentalism

The art and psychology of green persuasion

Published on April 6, 2013 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

Let's say you want to advocate for a greener school or workplace. You have an initial list of ecologically-sound goals: recycling, green cleaning chemicals, water filtration to reduce plastic bottle use, organic waste composting, solar-powered rechargers, and so on. Once these institutional changes are in place, you will have created the conditions for part-time environmentalism: everyone in the institution will have the opportunity to act in environmentally conscious ways.

But being a part-time environmentalist is not a gateway to full-time involvement. Getting “involved” is time-consuming and difficult to fit into what sociologists call “habits of thought.” And green habits of thought are prerequisites for thorough and effective full-time environmentalism through everyday social routines.

To persuade people to make environmentalism more than a part-time activity, you might need a green media campaign. The media (as broadly defined) play a pivotal role in spreading knowledge of the scientific, social, and political variables upon which environmental literacy depends.

Previous Post
[Should We Care About Celebrity Environmentalists?](#)

Subscribe to Greening the Media
[Subscribe via RSS](#)



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. **Toby Miller, Ph.D.**, is an interdisciplinary social scientist. [more...](#)



Related Articles

- [The Complexity of Global Warming](#)
- [We Are All Biosphere People Now](#)
- [Where Were You When Walter Cronkite's Death was Announced?](#)
- [What Does SuperFreakonomics Have in Common with Old Tobacco Ads?](#)
- [Vampires vs Zombies: Who's Winning the War for the Recession Psyche?](#)

What could be simpler? You employ a range of available communication tools—banners, posters, flyers, email, seminars, speeches, sermons, games, prizes, blogs...whatever works within your setting to engrain environmental ideas and actions. (An interesting example is the Transition Network).¹

But it never is a simple matter of persuasion by reason. Most scholars would agree that media campaigns must account for preexisting biases and ideologies. Such beliefs help to explain how and when green persuasion works—or doesn't.

We know, for instance, that Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* generally misinform the public about climate science and much entertainment programming distorts the context, history, and social impact of climate change—when such themes are presented at all.²

In this context, a green media campaign might benefit from the insights of two recent psychological studies, which suggest that the effectiveness of the message depends to a significant extent on how well it communicates to liberal and conservative partisans. This might seem like another “duh” moment in the annals of science, like testing whether or not people feel happier when it's sunny rather than cloudy. After all, on the topic of environmental risk, the conventional wisdom (in the United States at least) is that climate change is a liberal concern, while conservatives attack the notion as hokum. But these studies show that the problem of ideology is far from settled.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and Stanford University investigated the impact of “environmental discourse” in newspaper editorials and public-service announcements. They found that the media primarily frame environmental risk through moral arguments

Find a Therapist

Search for a mental health professional near you.

Find Local:

Greening the Media Recent Posts

The art and psychology of green persuasion

They're effective at greening their celebrity, but not at greening the media.

Why the industry always gets us wrong in their fantasy of abundance and growth.



Give the gift of Extended Producer Responsibility. We'll all be happy you did.

Mr. Doe joins the socially valuable but perilous history of artful raggicking.

[More of Greening the Media blog](#)

Most Popular

[Most Read](#) [Most Emailed](#)

Acupuncturists
Chiropractors
Massage Therapists
Dentists
and more!

City or Zip

about social harm and care. These resonate most effectively with liberals. When pro-environmental discourse shifts into the “moral domain” of purity and disgust, its messages resonate better with conservatives. The researchers recommend that reframing pro-environmental messages using both harm/care and purity/disgust “can reduce the gap between liberals and conservatives in environmental concerns.”³

Another recent study—a collaboration between political scientists and neuroscientists in the US and Europe—raises related questions by examining the brain functions of liberals and conservatives exposed to risk-taking. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), they found that both groups are willing risk-takers, but liberals and conservatives differ dramatically in their brain activity when doing so. Conservatives activate the right amygdala, which is attuned to external threats and potential rewards. Liberals, by contrast, have greater activity in the area associated with social- and self-awareness. The researchers observe that “acting as a partisan in a partisan environment may alter the brain, above and beyond the effect of heredity.”⁴

The first of these studies tells us that conservatives react in pro-environmental ways to repellent imagery of environmental disaster because it elicits disgust or poses threats to bodily purity—contaminated water, toxic spills, smog-enveloped cities, and so on. Green persuasion could use this moral frame more often, together with the care/harm frame, which uses imagery more resonate with liberals such as deforestation, habitat destruction, and drought-ravaged land. Cognitive linguistic research on environmental frames, ideology, and political partisanship offers many communication strategies like these.⁵



The neuro-political “Red Brain, Blue Brain” study argues that political milieus structure how the brain functions, suggesting that conservatives and liberals who live in the echo-chamber of their political beliefs—including the media they use—engage with such risks as climate change in significantly different ways. This is intriguing research, and hints at new and interesting directions for green persuasion. The use of fMRI as an experimental tool is cutting edge in cognitive neuroscience and its application might be useful in designing effective communication strategies, though we recommend a strong dose of critical neuroscience to go along with this approach.⁷

We have other quibbles with these studies. A liberal/conservative dualism might apply to the United States, but not so securely to societies where governance and media systems tolerate greater political diversity. And the second study seemed, at times, like an advertisement for the fMRI as a political market research tool, an expensive one to be sure.

Caveats aside, these studies suggest that any campaign to persuade large groups of people to think and act in a pro-environmental manner must take into account political ideologies, moral cues, and neural processes. It may be a liberal brain that responds to the assertion that the ecological crisis and risks to human and non-human nature affect everyone. But that is also the scientific consensus, which makes the task of developing effective green persuasion all the more urgent.



[Subscribe to Psychology Today](#) now and get a free issue!

-  [13 of Psychology's Newest and Coolest Ideas](#)
by Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D.
- [What Do Men Really Want?](#)
by Eric Jaffe
-  [Boost Your Confidence By Saying Less](#)
by Christine Meinecke, Ph.D.
- [The 12 Ties that Bind Long-Term Relationships](#)
by
- [The Power of Touch](#)
by Rick Chillot



Ending Addiction For Good
Richard Taite & Constance Scharff, PhD
The ground-breaking, holistic, evidence-based way to transform your life. Buy on Amazon.com today!
[Read more](#)



Kyo-Dophilus
The beneficial probiotics in Kyo-Dophilus help maintain healthy digestion and a strong immune system.
[Read more](#)



Sierra Tucson Treatment Center
Multi-licensed, accredited psychiatric hospital; internationally acclaimed neuropsychiatric treatment for addictions, mood, pain, and coexisting disorders.
[Read more](#)

Current Issue



The Power of Touch
Touch is the first way we communicate and bond as humans.

[MORE FROM THIS ISSUE](#)

[ISSUE ARCHIVES](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

Have a comment? [Start the discussion here!](#)

Tags: cleaning chemicals, climate change, climate science, ecology, environmental communication, environmental ideas, environmental literacy, fox news, green persuasion, greener school, institutional changes, media, media campaign, media campaigns, organic waste composting, political variables, psychological studies, rechargers, social impact, sustainability, time activity, time involvement, transition network, wall street journal, water filtration

Follow Psychology Today:  [Twitter](#)  [FaceBook](#)

Agoda's Best Hotel Offers

Agoda.com/Hotels

Save up to 75% Instant confirmation Get prices!



Psychology Today

© Copyright 1991-2013
Sussex Publishers, LLC

The Therapy Directory [HealthPros.com](#) [BuildingPros.com](#)

© Copyright 2002-2013 Sussex Directories, Inc.

[About/Contact](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Site Help/Customer](#)
[Service](#)
[Terms of Use](#)

[Therapy Directory Index](#)
[Healthpros Index](#)
[Buildingpros Index](#)