



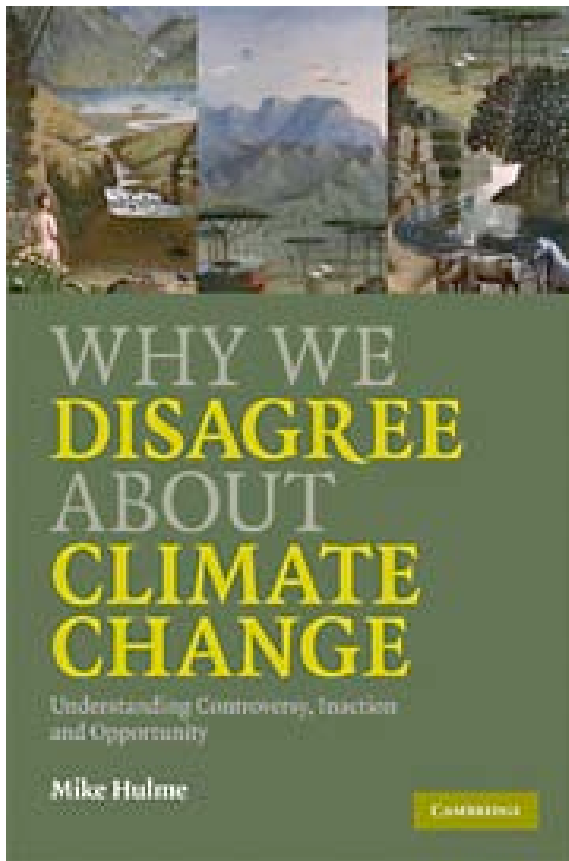
Understanding Public Discourses about Climate Change

Steve Schwarze
Associate Professor
Dept. of Communication Studies

Today's Objectives

- Share two communication models relevant to climate discourse
- Explain framing
- Identify journalistic norms
- Observe rhetorical strategies

Mike Hulme



- Director, Tyndall Centre for Climate Research-UK
- Geographer
- Returned to get graduate degree in history
- “We cannot detach the stories we tell about climate from the stories we tell about societies” (p.33)



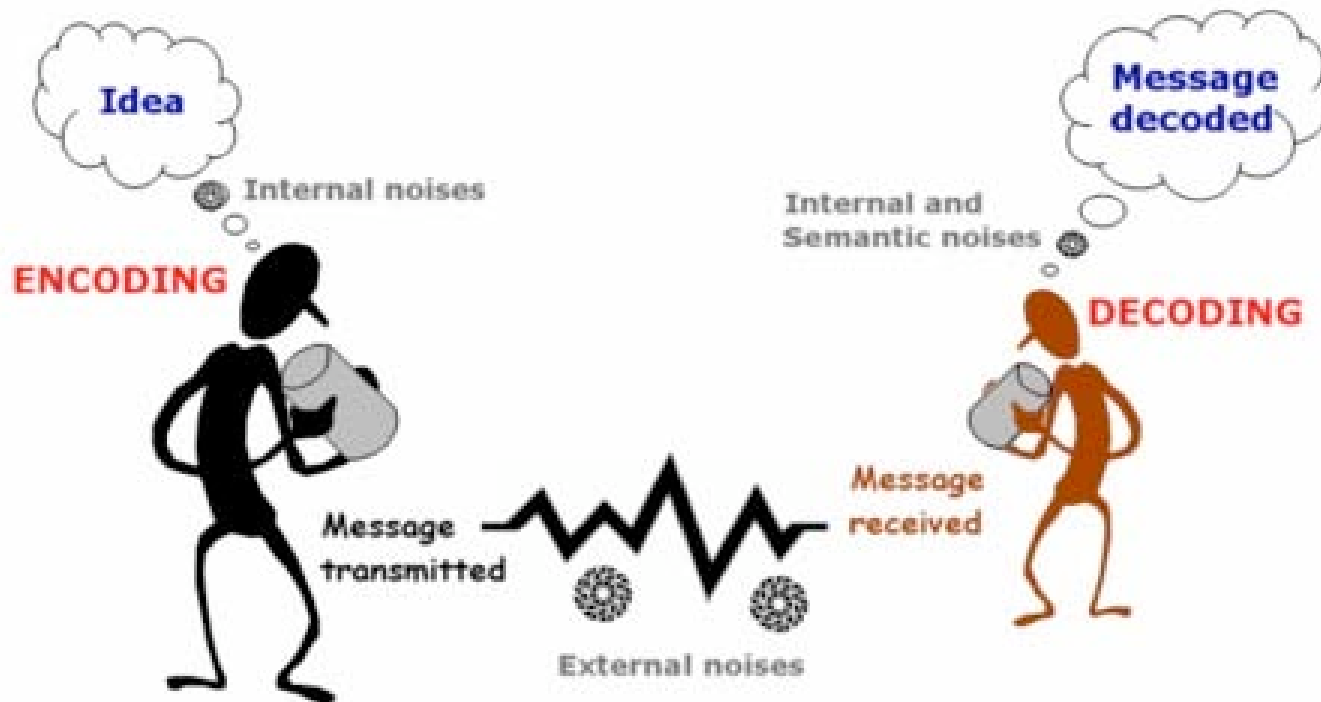
The Fundamental Question:

**How do we come to understand
climate change?**

Information-Deficit Model

- Scientists possess information
- Public lacks information
- With information, public would change behavior, make better decisions
- Media's job: conduit for information


Deficit Model



Communication as “transmission” or info transfer

Deficit Model: Problems

- Presumes one-way flow of communication
- Presumes “rational actors”
- Ignores mediating factors
 - Individual attitudes & values
 - Social & political contexts
 - Other messages
- Privileges “technocratic” decision-making



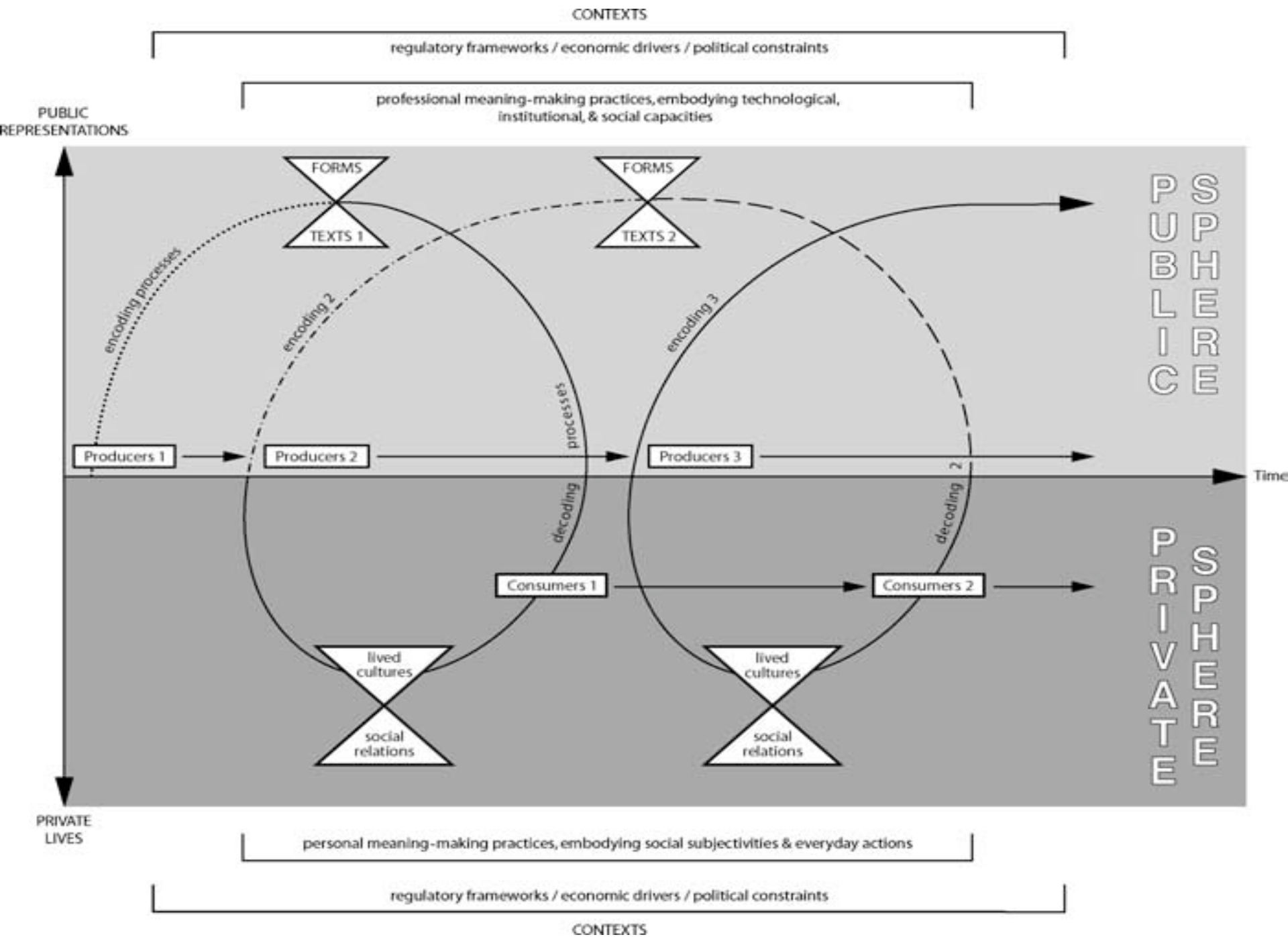
“People and organisations who adopt this mode of reasoning are very likely to end up frustrated”

(Hulme 218)

Cultural Circuits Model

- Communication as “circulation”
- Multiple messages, constantly reinterpreted
- Everyone is sender and receiver
- Media as “site of struggle” for meaning

Carvalho and Burgess, *Risk Analysis* 2005



One of the reasons...

“...we receive multiple and conflicting messages about climate change and we interpret them in different ways.”

Hulme, 215

Frames

- Organizing themes or storylines that provide meaning to events
- NOT = specific policy position
- “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” Entman, *J of Comm* 1993

“This is a story about...”

- Scientific uncertainty
- Progress/innovation
- Economic competitiveness
- Justice/equity
- Pandora’s box
- Public accountability
- Political tactics & personalities

The Luntz Memo

THE ENVIRONMENT: A CLEANER, SAFER, HEALTHIER AMERICA

The core of the Democrat argument depends on the belief that "*Washington regulations*" represent the best way to preserve the environment. We don't agree.

- 1) ***First, assure your audience that you are committed to "preserving and protecting" the environment, but that "it can be done more wisely and effectively."*** (Absolutely do not raise economic arguments first.) Tell them a personal story from your life. Since many Americans believe Republicans do not care about the environment, *you will never convince people to accept your ideas until you confront this suspicion and put it to rest.*
- 2) ***Provide specific examples of federal bureaucrats failing to meet their responsibilities to protect the environment.*** Do not attack the *principles* behind existing legislation. Focus instead on the way it is enforced or carried out, and use rhetorical questions.
- 3) ***Your plan must be put in terms of the future, not the past or present.*** We are carrying forward a legacy, yes, but we are trying to make things *even better* for the future. *The environment is an area in which people expect progress*, and when they do not see progress being made, they get frustrated.
- 4) ***The three words Americans are looking for in an environmental policy, they are "safer," "cleaner," and "healthier."*** Two words that summarize what Americans are expecting from regulators and agencies are "*accountability*" and "*responsibility*."
- 5) ***Stay away from "risk assessment," "cost-benefit analysis," and the other traditional environmental terminology used by industry and corporations.*** Your constituents don't know what those terms mean, and they will then assume that you are pro-business.
- 6) ***If you must use the economic argument, stress that you are seeking "a fair balance" between the environment and the economy.*** Be prepared to specify and quantify the jobs lost because of needless, excessive or redundant regulations.
- 7) ***Describe the limited role for Washington.*** We must *thoroughly review* the environmental regulations already in place, decide which ones we still need, identify those which no longer make sense, and make sure we don't add any unnecessary rules. Washington should disclose the *expected cost* of current and all new environmental regulations. *The public has a right to know.*
- 8) ***Emphasize common sense.*** In making regulatory decisions, we should use best estimates and *realistic assumptions*, not the worst-case scenarios advanced by environmental extremists.

- Frank Luntz, 2001-02
- Rhetorical handbook for GOP candidates
- Based on survey rsch, in-depth focus groups

“Winning the Global Warming Debate”

- “The scientific debate remains open.
- “Americans want a free and open discussion.
- “Technology and innovation are the key in arguments on both sides.
- “The ‘international fairness’ issue is the emotional home run.
- “There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.”

Climate & Energy Truths

- ecoAmerica 2009,
with Lake Research,
Westen Strategies
- Rhetorical handbook
for climate advocates
- Based on survey rsch,
in-depth focus groups



Westen
Strategies, LLC

Lake
Research
Partners

ecoAmerica
start with people

CONFIDENTIAL: This report is the confidential property of ecoAmerica. It is provided by hard copy only to climate solutions advocates to help enhance and unify their communications. Please do not copy or distribute in any form without the express advance approval of ecoAmerica. For additional copies, please contact kara@ecoAmerica.org.

“Trans-Partisan, Winning Messages”: Freedom & self-sufficiency

- Key finding: Voters are more energized around the energy debate than the climate change debate.

“Freedom, independence, and self-sufficiency are at the heart of who we are as a nation, and they should be at the heart of our strategy for energy independence in the 21st century.”

“Trans-Partisan, Winning Messages”: Made in America

“The best way to bring jobs and prosperity back to this country is also the best way to end our dependence on foreign oil and protect the Earth we leave our children: to build things in America again, starting with wind turbines, solar panels, and energy-efficient products that say ‘Made in America.’”

Journalistic Norms

- Personalization--people v. issues
- Dramatization--conflict v. continuity
- Novelty--new v. chronic
- Authority-Order--establishment voices
- Balance--equal attention to disputants

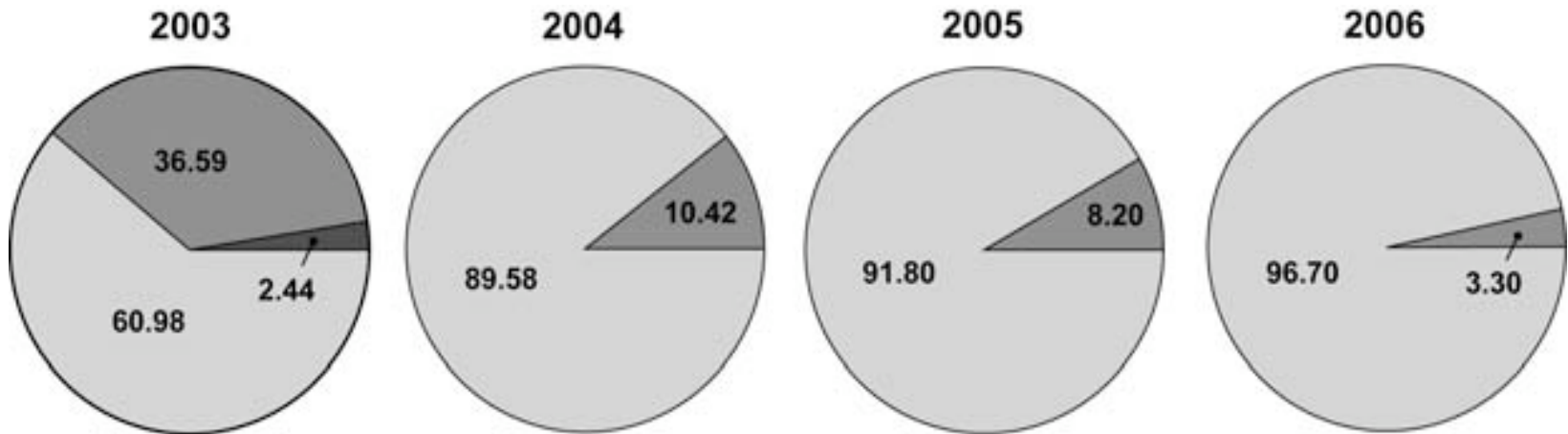
Bennett, *Political Comm* 1996; 2002

“Balance as Bias”

- Prestige press 1988-2002
- Majority (52%) of articles about causes give “balanced” treatment of AGW
- 35% gave both sides, but dominant coverage of human contributions
- On solutions, 78% balanced (immediate, mandatory v. cautious, voluntary)

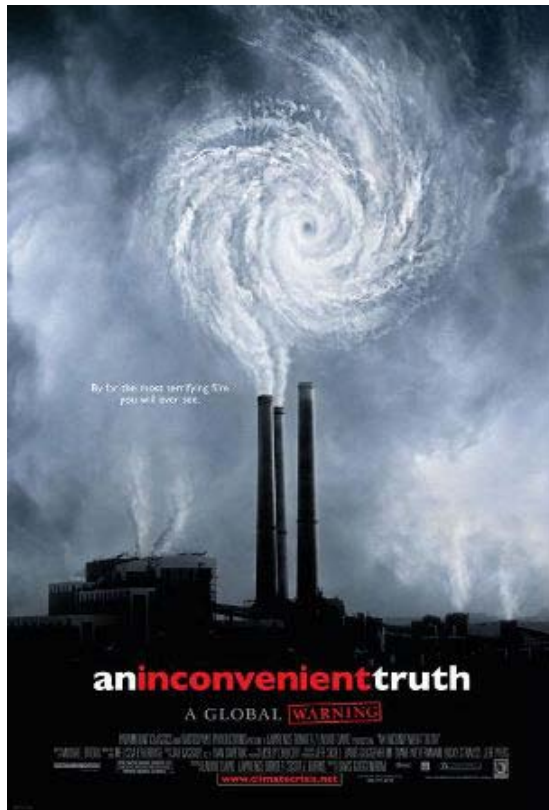
Boykoff&Boykoff, *GlobEnvChg* 2004

But things are changing...



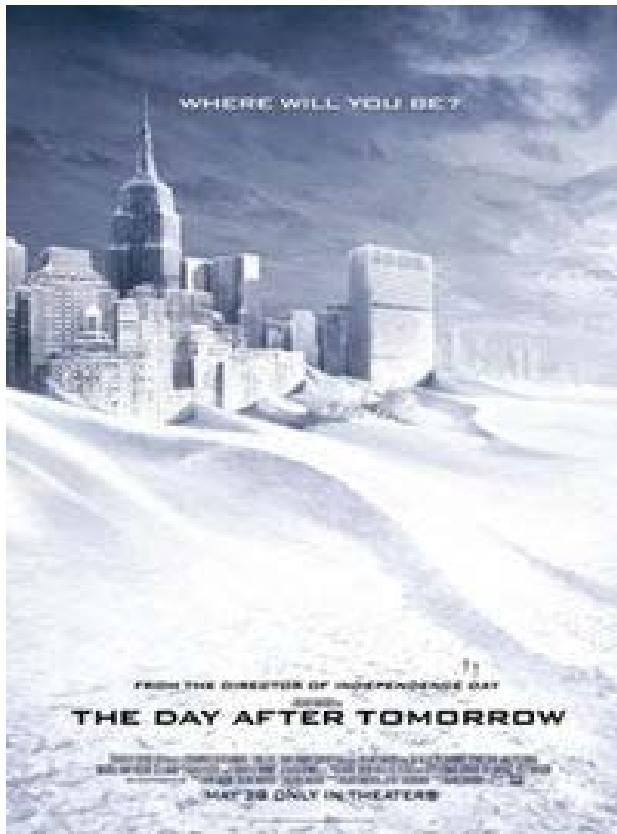
Boykoff, *Area* 2007

Narrative Genres



- Recurring stories with similar plotlines, conflicts, characters
- Can be fictional or factual (or both)
- Can shape perception, motivate action

Apocalyptic Rhetoric



- Issues warning of catastrophe
- Contests beliefs about Progress
- Invites charges of alarmism, exaggeration

Killingsworth & Palmer 1996

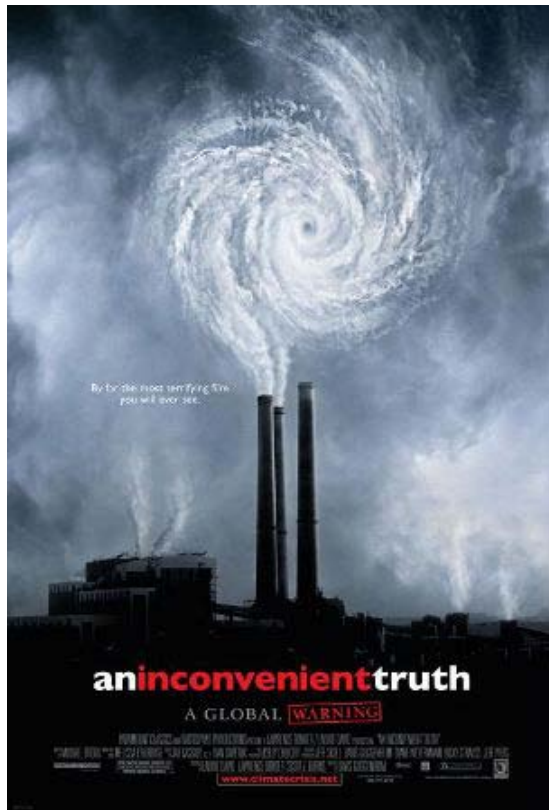
Environmental Melodrama



©vanwaardenphoto.com

- Defines conflict as public
- Clear hero, victim, villain
- Moral and emotional appeals sharpen conflict
- Invites charges of polarization

An Inconvenient Truth



- “Tempered” apocalyptic for scientific citizenship (Johnson, *RhetRvw* 2009; Spoel et al., *TechCQ* 2009)
- Mythic quest uniting jeremiad, autobiography, documentary (Rosteck & Frentz, *QJSpch* 2009)

An Inconvenient Truth

As this popular documentary reflects, our contemporary cultural meanings of nature [climate change??] may not be either one or the other, but may well be as contradictory and as incongruous as the symbolic action that animates this film.

(Rosteck & Frentz, 16)

Icons & Image Events



Icons & Image Events

- Play into journalistic norms
- Often seen as stunts, gimmicks
- But not merely attention-getting devices
 - Sites where meaning is contested
 - Appeal to new audiences
 - Can reveal hidden practices