



# Understanding Public Discourses about Climate Change

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How do we communicate about  
climate change?

**Let me count the ways...**



**The understanding of anthropogenic warming and cooling influences on climate has improved since the Third Assessment Report (TAR), leading to *very high confidence* that the globally averaged net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming, with a radiative forcing of +1.6 [+0.6 to +2.4] W m<sup>-2</sup>. (see Figure SPM-2).  
{2.3. 6.5, 2.9}**

**IPCC 4AR Summary, 2007**

Rolling Stone

Issue 1076  
January 21, 2009 \$4.99  
rollingstone.com

# YOU IDIOTS!

MEET THE PLANET'S  
WORST ENEMIES

Inside the Battle Over Global Warming

**We Can Solve It (2008).**

**A massive carbon tax or a cap-and-trade rationing system would likely cost more than the damages it would prevent. Either would be an impractical, panicky reaction that would be both more expensive and less effective than targeted technology development.**

**Jim Manzi, *The New Republic*, June 22, 2010**

APRIL 24, 2009



Detroit: Why  
The Survivors  
Will Prosper

Joe Klein: Why  
It's High Time to  
Legalize Pot



The Tragic Tales  
Of Army Recruiters  
Suicides

# TIME

SPECIAL ENVIRONMENT ISSUE

Illustration: Tom  
Petersen (www.tom  
petersen.com)

## Vanishing Act

How  
Climate Change  
Is Causing  
A New Age  
Of Extinction

BY OPYKH WALSH

www.time.com

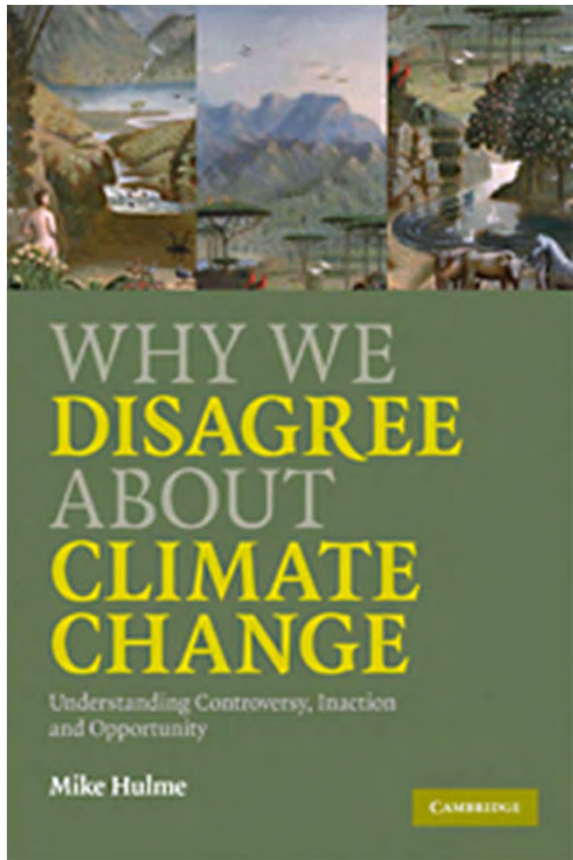





## Central Idea

**Climate change is a cultural phenomenon,  
not simply a physical one.**

# *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*



- Mike Hulme
- Tyndall Centre for Climate Research, UK
- Geographer by training



**Climate change is an idea that carries as many different *meanings* and *interpretations* in contemporary political and cultural life as do [democracy, terrorism, or nationalism].**

(pg. 322)

# The Fundamental Issue

**What does climate change *mean*?**



Not...

- **What is climate change?**
- **What will get people to believe climate science?**
- **How do we persuade people to support cap-and-trade?**

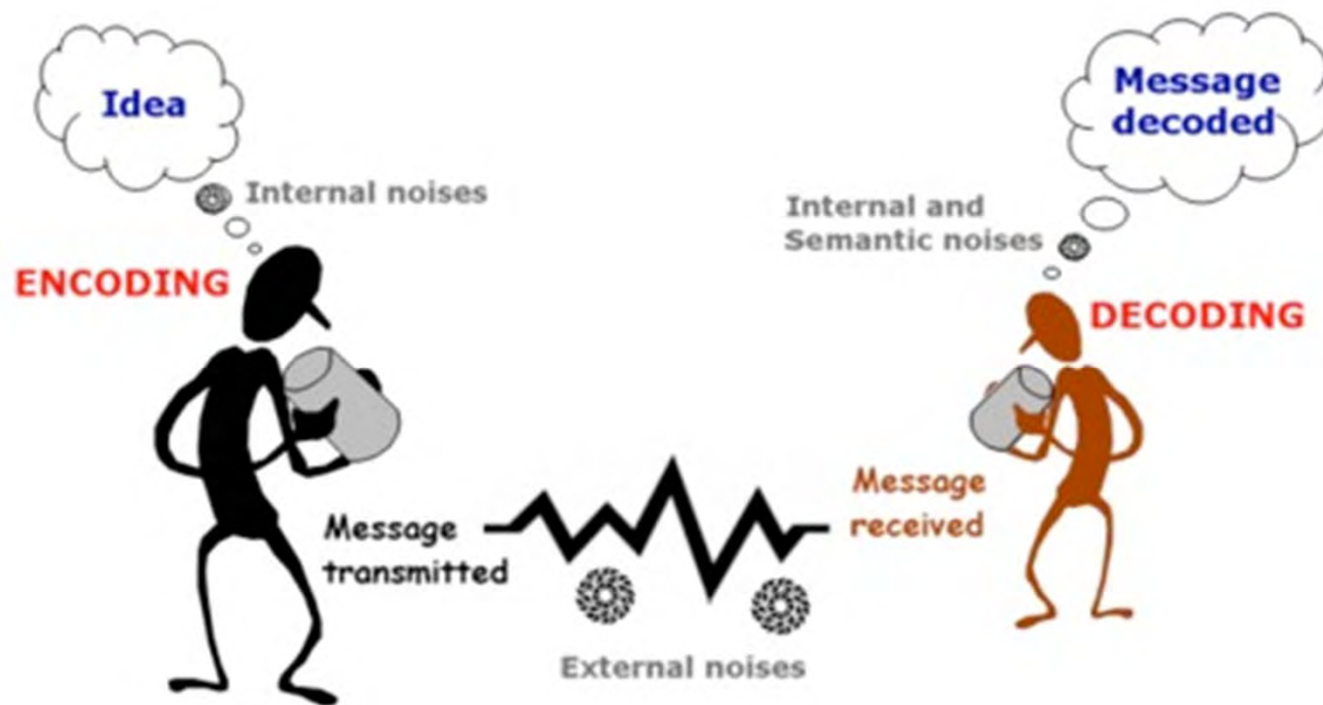
# Today's Agenda

- **Share two communication models relevant to CΔ**
- **Explain framing**
- **Identify journalistic norms**
- **Observe rhetorical appeals and strategies**

# Information-Deficit Model

- Scientists possess information
- Public lacks information
- When public gets the right information:  
change behavior, make right decisions
- Media's job: conduit for information

# Deficit Model




Communication as “transmission” or info transfer



# Deficit Model: Problems

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



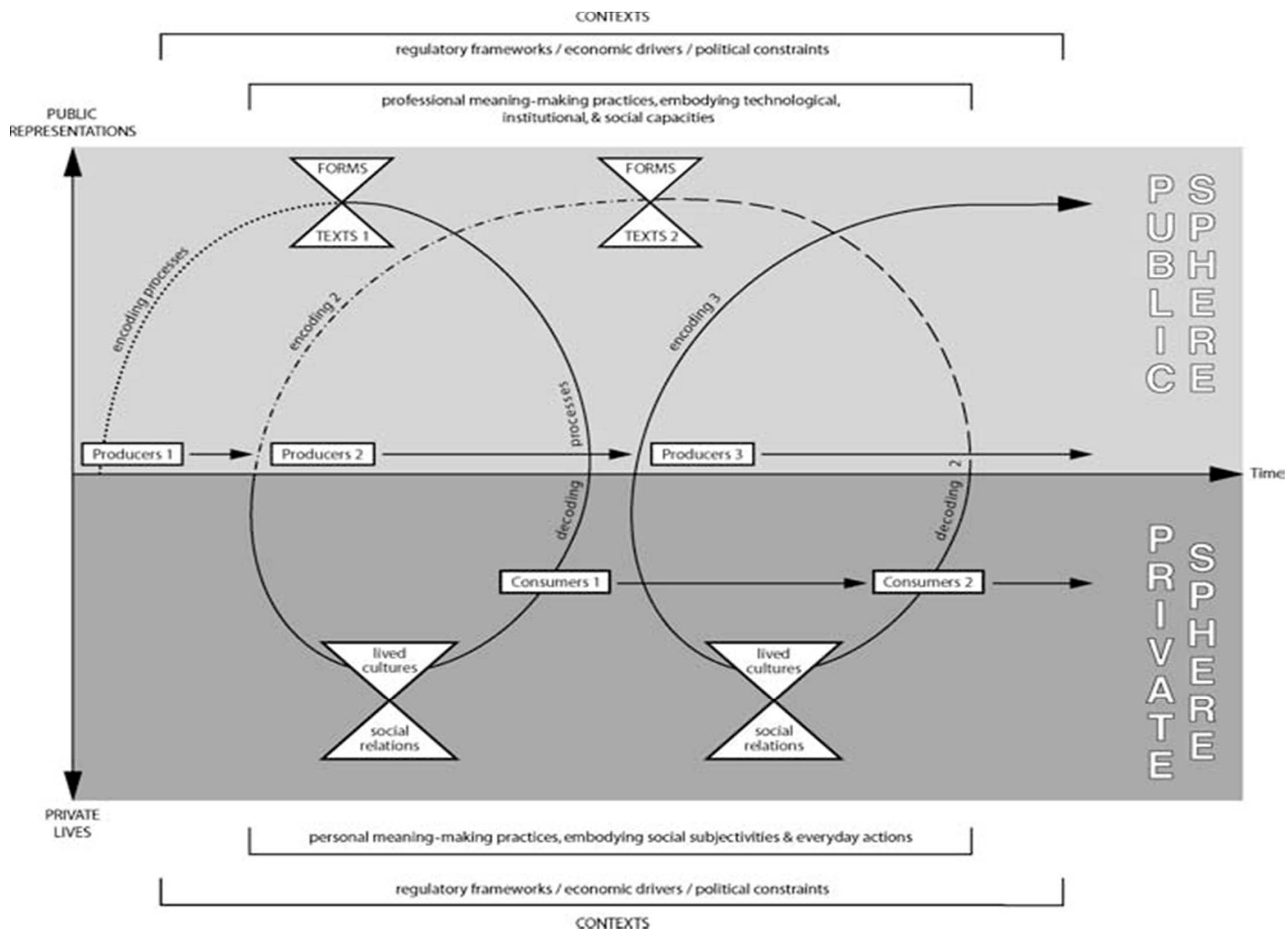
**“People and organizations who adopt this mode of reasoning are very likely to end up frustrated.”**

**(Hulme 218)**

# Cultural Circuits Model

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

Carvalho and Burgess, *Risk Analysis* 2005



# One of the reasons we disagree...

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

Hulme, 215



# Frames

- Frames = organizing themes or storylines that provide meaning to events
- Used by news media to tell a familiar story
- Used by advocates to strategically advance interests, preferred policies

# Frames

- “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

Adapted from Nisbet & Scheufele, 2007



# 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

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## “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.’”*

# Are Frames Enough?



- *Env Comm* 4.1 (2010)
- Perpetuates top-down, one-way communication
- Fails to produce large-scale mobilization
- Has yet to strategize how mobilization leads to desired outcomes

# Journalistic Norms

- Personalization—focus on *persons*, not issues
- Dramatization—focus on *conflict*, not continuity
- Novelty—focus on the *new*, not chronic
- Authority-Order—focus on establishment voices
- Balance--equal attention to disputants, regardless of validity

Bennett, *Political Comm* 1996; 2002

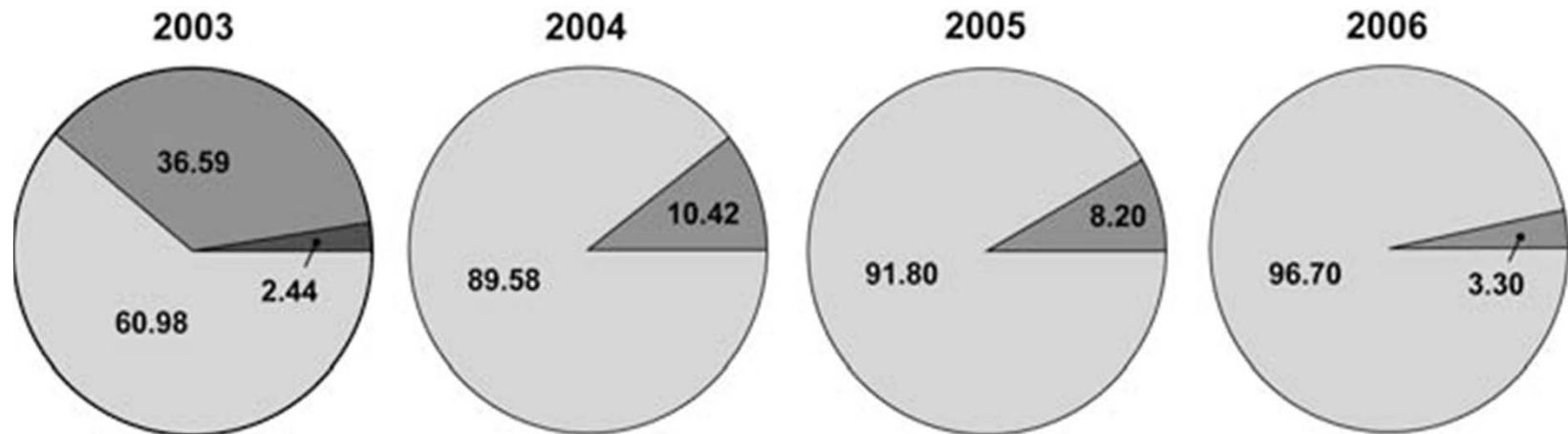
## “Balance as Bias”

- Prestige press 1988-2002
- On causes of warming, majority (52%) of articles gave “balanced” treatment (human v. natural)
- On solutions, 78% gave balanced treatment (immediate & mandatory vs. voluntary, cautious)

Boykoff&Boykoff, *GlobEnvChg* 2004



# But things have changed...



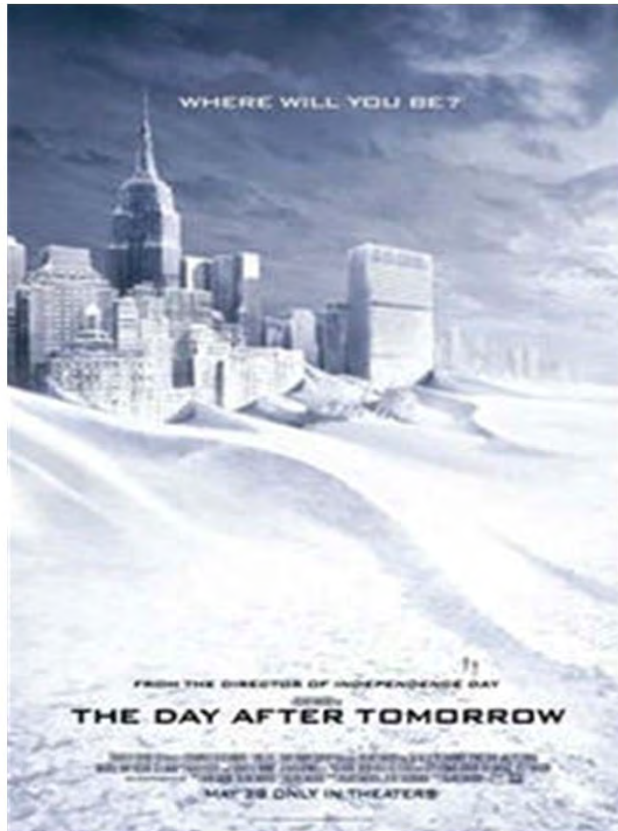
Boykoff, *Area* 2007

# Rhetorical Appeals: Narrative Genres



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

# Apocalyptic Rhetoric



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

Killingsworth & Palmer 1996

# Environmental Melodrama



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

Schwarze, *QtlyJSpch* 2006

# Environmental Melodrama

How are conflicts defined?

- Does the conflict shed light on a larger, more systemic problem?
- Does the conflict focus on short-term problems rather than long-term challenges?

Foust & Murphy, *EnvComm* 2009

# *An Inconvenient Truth*



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

# Visual Rhetoric





# Shepard Glacier

## Glacier National Park, MT



**1913**

*W. C. Alden photo*  
USGS Photographic Library



**2005**

*Blase Reardon photo*  
USGS



USGS Repeat Photography Project  
<http://nrmsc.usgs.gov/repeatphoto/>



# Image Events

- Capitalizes on journalistic norms
- Functions as an attention-getting device

But what else can they do...?

- Reveal hidden practices
- Reach far-flung audiences
- Contest dominant meanings

# Steve's Top Ten

- Know your audience
- Identify credible messengers
- Focus on local/observable impacts
- Focus on immediate impacts
- Focus on health impacts

# Steve's Top Ten

- Focus on solutions
- Link personal action to political action
- Link climate change to related issues
- Build communication among peers
- Tell stories