

## Looking at Australia's climate movement communications: Potential and obstacles

By Dr Kitty van Vuuren, School of Communication & Arts, The University of Queensland, October, 2015

Between 30 November and 11 December this year, the United Nations Conference on Climate Change will be held in Paris (COP 21), with the aim "to reach, for the first time, a universal, legally binding agreement that will enable us to combat climate change effectively and boost the transition towards resilient, low-carbon societies and economies" (<http://www.cop21.gouv.fr>).

Australia has a poor record when it comes to doing its bit to deal with climate change—Australians are amongst the highest per capita emitters on the planet—but now that we have a new PM, with Malcolm Turnbull ousting climate denier Tony Abbott, there is some hope that Australia will join the global effort to mitigate and adapt to the challenges it faces as a result of global warming.

Although these Conference of Parties (COP) meetings are foremost a forum for the leadership of nations, ever since the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the global climate movement has been present at these gatherings. Around 2,400 representatives from non-government organisations were present at the 1992 meeting to send a message to the 172 governments that attended the meeting. Around the globe a further 17,000 people joined in parallel forums. Since then, the global climate movement has continued to grow. At COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, about 50,000 people attended Klimaforum09, the alternative People's Climate Summit, while back in Australia about 50,000 people marched around the nation calling for world leaders to create a strong and binding agreement.

A civil society presence at high-profile meetings of international leaders can ensure that the climate movement has a voice. As we saw at the G20 meeting in Brisbane last November, such events attract journalists and observers from around the world and offer a unique opportunity to raise the issues of movement activists, issues that are increasingly of concern to most ordinary people.

There is no doubt that coordination of climate change actions at international events and parallel actions in many countries around the world has benefitted from online media. They have strengthened the capacity of civil society and activists to organise their actions and programs, as well as made it far easier to cheaply and quickly reach out to the broader community. In his 2013 book "The Future", Al Gore devotes a chapter to the role of communication in the social transformation of society. He notes the profound changes to the human species generated by the development of speech, writing and the alphabet and then gives examples of the tremendous power of the Internet and social media in bringing about positive social change. But Gore warns that the promise of democratic invigoration offered by the Internet has not been wholly fulfilled. Although he devotes much of his discussion to how these same technologies can be used to control societies, since they make it far easier to undertake surveillance, he also points out that while Internet-based campaigns can quickly spark widespread campaigns and actions, they can also quickly fizzle out. He suggests that the success or otherwise of the use of online media is related to the cultures within which they operate: "political consciousness" is "embodied in formal structures that... govern according to the principles articulated by the reformers" (p. 62).

My research of grass-roots community groups and campaigns indicates that Gore's suggestion, that an organisation's communication is related to its organisational culture, also operates at the national and local level, and can be applied to less formal as well as formal organisations. My past research of community radio stations demonstrated such a link. Furthermore, the smaller, locally-based groups and organisations all form part of the broader climate change movement, alongside the more high profile campaigns such as WWF's Earth Hour, or GetUp!

Our current knowledge of the Australian climate movement is meager. In 2012, Verity Burgmann and Hans Baer published *Climate Politics and the Climate Movement in Australia* (Melbourne University Press), and there have been some journal articles published about organisations such as GetUp! Much of this work focuses on their political impact. My current research, conducted together with Dr Karey Harrison at the University of Southern Queensland, titled 'Shifting Climate Change Perspectives in Australia', is more interested in the suggestion put forward by Gore above, and aims to test the belief that organisational communications approaches are related to their cultures. We are particularly interested in how and to whom organisations talk about climate change, as well as what is said, and with whom they are connected. I am currently conducting interviews with representatives of

grass roots organisations that are actively campaigning on climate change to answer some of these questions; we will also be looking at websites and other publications. HOPE is one such group, and an example of a more traditional non-government organization: it is incorporated and has a relatively formal structure, with a management committee elected at an annual general meeting. By contrast, other groups might be more loosely structured and largely conduct 'meetings' online. Although it is tempting to suggest that some structures work better than others, from a research point of view, different kinds of organisations will appeal to different kinds of people, and each may 'work' successfully according to their own cultural logic.

Given the scale of the challenges and risks presented by climate change many different approaches in grass-roots organisation and activism offer many different opportunities for innovative and effective ways to talk about and spread the message, as well as change behaviour. This research will reveal successes as well as point to opportunities to strengthen the movement. The results from this project will contribute towards publishing a book, and add to a small but growing history of climate activism in Australia.