

Role of film in science communication

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Abstract

“The power of the social process of science to answer positive questions and advance our knowledge of the world is unparalleled in human history” – Dressler & Parsons (2006)

If the results of scientific research are to confer benefit (or to reduce harm) to society it seems self-evident that they must be conveyed and understood to its leaders (for rational decision-making) and the public (who have to live with the consequences).

Most scientific knowledge for scientists and non-scientists alike used to come from books that summarised the state of knowledge of the day, and in recent decades special journals have joined in this role for both groups. However the increasing speed of communication in recent decades from computer processing power and the internet, and the rise of social media as a vehicle for influencing the opinion of both public and leaders, make it useful to reflect on what strategies for communicating science on the big issues of our time are likely to be most effective.

The classical means of communicating science within and beyond the science community itself, through journal articles and reports linked with standard and social media campaigns, is now routine, and widely reports for events like the latest IPCC report. But societal action based on the implications of the new information is slow, however clear and compelling it may seem to those involved.

The science documentary as a film genre grew with a focus on the wonder of scientific discovery with the expansion of science after World War II, showing the public the scientific advances being made and how they were improving their lives. In recent times they have become a powerful means of conveying the complexity and beauty of the natural world (David Attenborough’s 100+ films) as well as the complexity and excitement of a major scientific endeavour (eg Particle Fever, 2013). Some are now focussing on reasons for concern revealed by science.

Arguably the most effective in the genre is Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” (2006), driven by good timing, sound science and an interesting story. Other recent documentaries with a climate and sea level focus include “Earth: the Operators Manual” (2012), “Thin Ice – the Inside Story of Climate Science” (2013), “Ice and the Sky” (2014), the TV series “Years of Living Dangerously” (2014, 2016) and “The Inconvenient Sequel” (2017). My talk will discuss the key features of these efforts to communicate the concern felt by climate scientists for the “catastrophe in slow motion” (as described by Pierrehumbert, 2006) to our leaders and the public, and what future opportunities might lie ahead.

References

Dressler, A.E., Parsons, E.A. 2006. The Science and Politics of Global Climate Change - a Guide to the Debate. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pierrehumbert, R. 2006. Climate Change: A Catastrophe in Slow Motion. Chicago Journal of International Law. 6: 1-14