

Increasing The Impact Of Individual Behaviour Change

Chris Rose. chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk

Posted 17 June 2020 at <http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org/?p=2577>

This post outlines a simple ‘three pillar’ framework to help realise the often untapped potential of behaviour change. Pillar 1 is private personal action in the form of a new behaviour which stays in the private domain. Pillar 2 is where that behaviour is made available in the public domain through informal channels such as face to face in ‘the community’ or networks, and on social media, enabling escalation of the impact if it is spread to others. Pillar 3 is where the behaviour is taken into the domain of formal networks such as politics, campaigning, media and professional organisations.

Introduction

It’s obvious that if nobody else knows about the new behaviour it has no effect on others and the change-impact goes no further than the individual action. In reality most new behaviours (for example those that cut climate pollution, such as replacing a diesel/petrol car with an electric one, or eating less meat) do have *some* effect on others but if they are actively communicated, and especially if this is done effectively, for instance using heuristics, values and framing, the effect can be magnified.

It argues that a huge amount of ongoing and potential behaviour change by individuals is having far less impact than it could, because little effort is put into deliberately catalysing its spread to others, such as friends and family, neighbours, and others in a community or network.

Some ‘top down’ campaigns aimed at securing change through force of government regulation or the power of corporate decision-making, ignore individual behaviour change. Other social marketing campaigns encourage only individual action. Too often the ‘middle ground’ is left to look after itself. This can leave highly motivated individuals worrying that their individual actions have little effect (eg ‘climate anxiety’), while the potential for adopters to become ‘champions’ and convert others, goes unrealised.

Cause groups often put a lot of effort into recruiting people into a ‘supporter journey’ leading to escalating activism or donations. The large number of people who are for one reason or another, not readily convertible to donors or activists, are frequently ignored. Here I argue that they could make gains if more individual behaviours became more public, where these

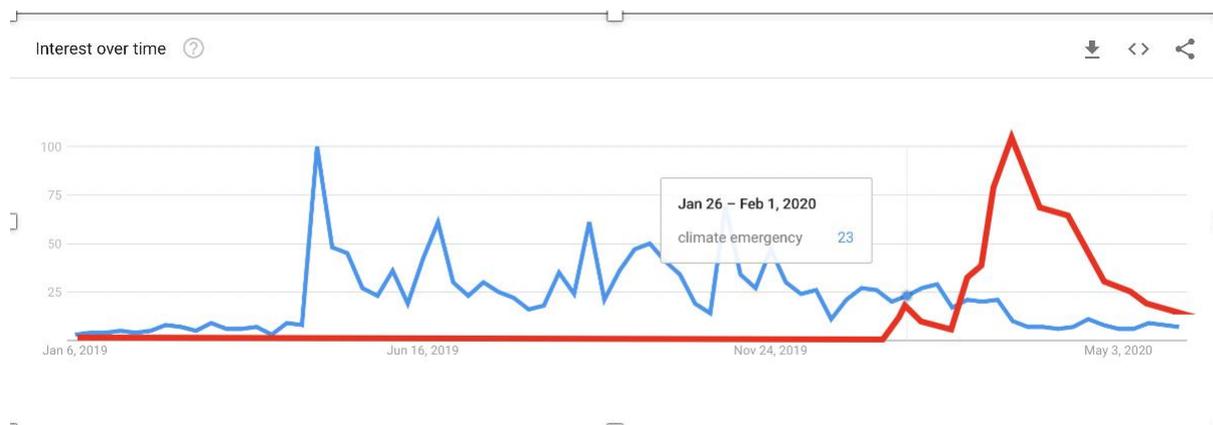
align with change goals – working to escalate behaviour visibility not just to escalate activism or donating.

The debate over whether campaigns should be top-down or bottom-up is long-running and when driven by competing ideological theories of change it probably can't be resolved. But for pragmatists, escalating the impact of individual behaviours so it is manifest in the 'middle ground' of society – the networks and communities between the individual and the 'public' - could make a significant difference on many issues.

The examples I give are mainly climate-related but the principles apply to many issues.

Remember The Climate Emergency ?

It may be hard to remember now but at least in some countries, in the world BC (Before Covid), the thing 'everyone wanted to talk about' was the Climate Emergency.



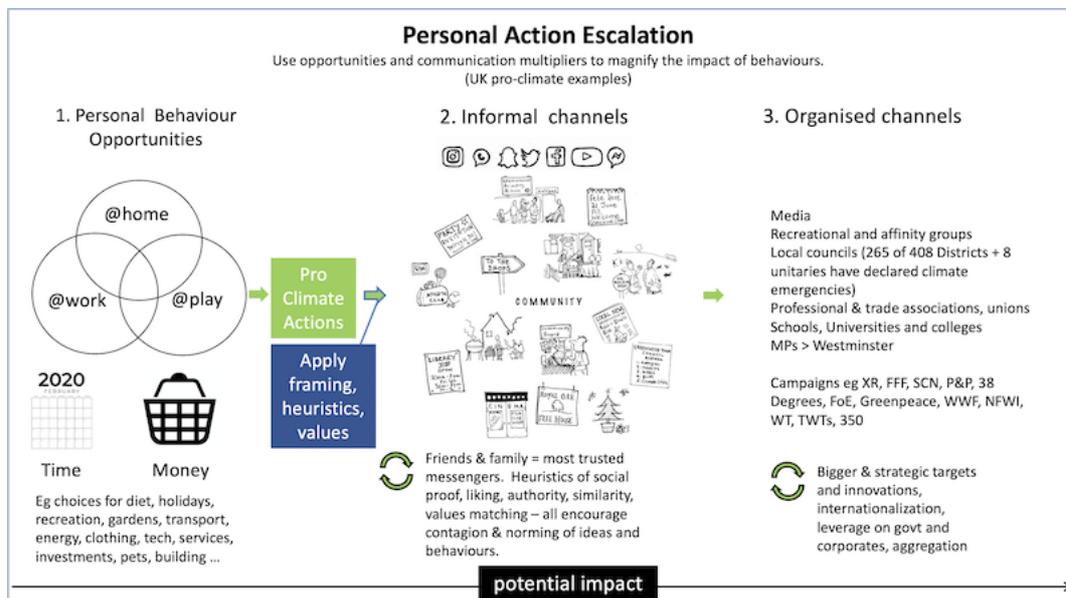
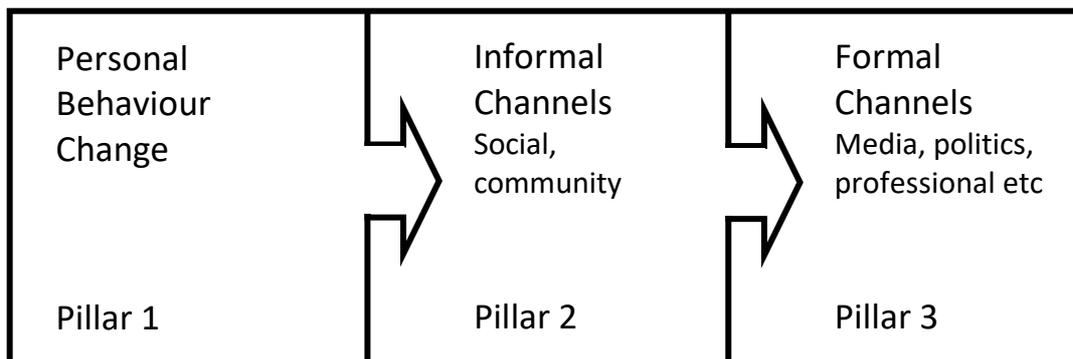
Worldwide Google Trends searches for 'Climate Emergency' (blue) and 'Coronavirus' (red) from 1 Jan 2019 to 8 June 2020, the latter copied and super-imposed. Apologies if this is an abuse of the Google Trends system – I couldn't get them to work together.

In winter 2019 Bob Earll asked me to contribute to the January 2020 '[Coastal Futures](#)' conference [1] in a session on climate change and communications. This annual event mainly attracts marine environmental professionals. Earll worried that his audience, who were pretty well-informed about the science, had become 'habituated' to the issue and so not everyone was treating it as an emergency. And many of those increasingly seized by the need to 'do something' beyond dealing with climate in some aspect of their day job, were in despair about whether individual action could 'make a difference'.

The previous year an interactive session had showed that while it was not a topic presented at the conferences, his audience was already engaged with a wide range of pro-climate behaviours in their domestic/ personal lives.

That year I shared some slides about the use of [‘Track 1 tools’ of values, framing and heuristics](#) in translating communication from technical/analytical (Track 2) terms used in professional and scientific communication, into intuitive terms for public communication. This year EarlI asked me to show how this could help individual action make a ‘bigger difference’ on climate. (See conference presentation [here](#), along with others on climate and psychology by [Ralph Rayner](#), [Sabine Pahl](#) and [John Englander](#). [Track 1 and 2 explanation here](#)).

Proposed Model For Personal Action Escalation



Personal Action Escalation ([Download bigger file](#)) – a Three Pillar schematic

After some head-scratching I came up with the simple three pillar Personal Action Escalation model (revised shareable version above). It’s based on three contexts or ‘pillars’ for action and effort to bring about change. The above is not exactly rocket science and social marketers will recognize many things in it that they already do. I’d be interested to hear of other methodologies which may be better – do [contact](#) me and please do leave a comment on this post.

Pillar 1 is individual behaviour change or behaviour 'adoption', Pillar 2 is further adoption through informal community or networks, and Pillar 3 is involvement with organised channels of decision-making, politics or campaigns. These are in effect choices for an individual: you can just 'stay' in (1) or engage others and get into (2) or also (or only) get involved at (3).

Pillar 1 – I Make A Change

Assuming a situation where you as an individual want to do something yourself, it suggests thinking about your opportunities to make a change in behaviour at home, at work or at play (Pillar 1).

For example (in relation to climate): choices for diet, holidays, recreation, gardens, transport, energy, clothing, tech, services, investments, pets, building ...

If this is not communicated to others, the change effect is contained here. If for instance, I switch from a petrol car to an electric one, or from a 'ordinary' mixed source electricity supply to a [green tariff](#), the beneficial climate effect is only proportional to the emissions that choice displaces, and nobody else may know about it.

If it ends here, net change is proportional only to the additive effect of all individual changes. But if each individual change influences others, it's more than additive, and if that continues, it can even become exponential (the 'r' rate above 1, one of the few bits of population biology to have entered popular consciousness, thanks to Covid). In reality many things can stop a sustained chain of contagion from developing but it's quite easy to get a degree of contagion.

Pillar 2 – Community Spread

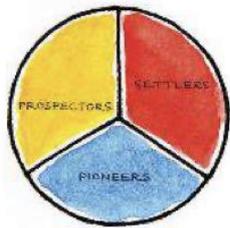
Once a behaviour exists, we can 'add value' and multiply the impact by engaging others through informal channels, including face to face (F2F) and social media. If I show my neighbour or relatives what I've done and they do the same, the effect is increased, and so on. The 'Track 1' tools of values, heuristics and framing can enhance the communication.

The Pillar 2 diagram above is my indicative British take on informal channels, contexts, moments or events in communities or networks, in other words the sorts of opportunities where this communication could happen:

social media, meeting at the Primary School gate, fetes, talking to neighbours, meeting other dog walkers, local news, local council meetings, community boards in supermarkets, Christmas, the pub, a film club, a bar-b-que, the library, a gym or sports club, shops, and a party (adjust for covid lockdowns).

If you make your own list of such touchpoints you'd of course want to take account of age, lifestage, lifestyle, disposable income and personal commitments (eg to children) to get a diverse range.

Applying these 'Track 1 tools' to enhance contagion of behaviours (emulating/ reproducing what someone else is doing) is more likely to work than trying to use them to get someone to adopt a new behaviour just by argument or advocacy, from a standing start. Indeed advocacy often does not even specify a behaviour. [Matched values](#), [heuristics](#) (cognitive biases) and [framing](#) can act like communications enzymes, as behavioural catalysts.



VALUES



HEURISTICS



Seeing something done and then doing the same yourself, is the well known 'social-proof' heuristic. A '[heuristic](#)' just means that at a population level it's likely to have that effect more than it does not (read [Robert Cialdini](#) or [How to Win Campaigns](#)). Add a values filter and you get a more refined design. [Settlers](#) are more affected by social proof than Pioneers but it will help if the example 'doer' is someone like them, preferably someone they know (similarity, identity). [Prospectors](#) likewise but it helps if the 'doer' is a success-model. [Pioneers](#) are also affected by social proof but less so and in four different ways. Framing it 'right' helps a lot but it needs testing on a case by case basis.

Tell your friends, family, colleagues.



Don't just do green things.
Turn your behaviour into an
influencing campaign

Share it online.
Hold a new car party.
Take them for a ride.
Park it where the neighbours will see it.
Offer someone a lift to the next
Extinction Rebellion or School
Strike. Start a club of other e-car
users to do the same ...



Graphics from Coastal Future talk

Above - some things a new electric car owner could do with a car to communicate her example. She's already put it on twitter. She could also take friends for a ride, park it where the neighbours would see it, hold a new car party or use it to give someone a lift – here it suggested giving young people a lift to the School Strikes (a genuine problem where I live, leading parents to drive their children to the strikes, usually in fossil-fuel powered cars).

A green tariff example might simply be if you switched to a green electricity supply and then communicated that to friends and neighbours, and they did likewise. There is a suggestion of how to make this largely 'invisible' choice more visible and 'transportable', below.

Social Media

Social media, 'old media' and mediated media have considerably converged but as the lockdown experience demonstrated, human beings are social animals and so far, technologies like Zoom cannot substitute for the power of In Real Life (IRL) interactions. So this process of trying to escalate the effect of individual action is going to work best where social media and F2F or other 'community' contagion work together.

If the campaign delivery mechanism is itself online – eg an online petition or purchase – then social media alone may be sufficient but in many cases, campaigns require real life action,

and even an ostensibly pure-online mechanism like a petition, not only usually asks for an IRL action but will be more effective if validated by IRL communication, such as what family members say to a decision-maker, face to face.

Moreover, most effective online mobilisations require a [social object](#), usually an IRL activity.

Social media makes the transaction cost of contacting others very low compared to the effort that may be involved in F2F and other channels but it also makes it very easy to acknowledge someone's example (eg behaviour) in a positive way (invoking the liking effect, eg literally a Facebook 'like') without even sharing, let alone changing a substantive behaviour. This can have the effect of stopping a chain of contagion. The commitment (to act) effect generated by a personal F2F interaction is likely to be much greater, if only because of the effort involved (see [this blog](#) on online and offline petitions).

The Power of Utility: the Fax Dynamic

"American wedding guest: Do you actually know Oscar Wilde?" Gareth: "Not personally no. But I do know someone who could get you his fax number. Shall we dance?"

[Four Weddings and A Funeral](#), second wedding scene

The holy grail of behaviour contagion is a new behaviour which gives you the doer more reward if others do it too, so you have an active incentive to spread it to others. An ancient technological example is the fax machine. The first one was incredibly expensive and useless in that there was nobody to send a fax to. The second one was 'better' for the users and the utility increased with every adoption leading to the 'fax dynamic' ("you really should get one – so we can fax each other"). Users became advocates: a free sales force. And of course faxes got cheaper. Social media apps and messenger services can spread this way.

The spread of the integrated ATM network, now being phased out as cash is used less and less, was driven by card-holders frustrated that they could not get money from another bank. Once they started to migrate to banks with bigger networks, the banks had an incentive to 'merge' their networks. Right now electric cars are creating a similar dynamic as users become lobbyists for more and better charging points.

VISA is famously a chaordic network brand (a term coined by VISA founder, [Dee Hock](#)) with hardly any centre, which spread because it was useful to users, both buyers and sellers.

Change campaigns and movements are not usually selling technology or monetized services so what is their product utility? It's not usually just the issue campaign objective but something to do with motivational values. To be part of something, a community, an

assertion or conservation of identity, safety, security or belonging (Settlers). To achieve, to be part of a visible success, to have a good time socially, respected, famous or admired (Prospectors). To have new and additional agency in changing the world 'for the better', to 'give back' (Transcender Pioneers), to be innovative and self-expressive (Flexible Individualist Pioneers), to live ethically (Concerned Ethical Pioneers), to seek a different way (Transitional Pioneers).

Pillar 3 – Engagement With Formalised Processes

To escalate personal action further, it can be taken into more formally organised channels such as associations, NGO campaigns, local politics and government, the media or affinity groups. By formalised I mean anything which is an entity recognizably designed to take or influence decisions – from XR to a rally to local government.

Taking the example of a green tariff, if we users now persuade our elected councillors to also switch to a green tariff and the Council then does the same to power its own assets, the effect of our example is escalated (an example of going from Pillar 1 to 2 to 3).

In the UK the electric car charging network is already and live issue in local council discussions and councils which have signed up to declare a Climate Emergency are in a difficult position if they don't act on it. Due to fears about coronavirus transmission, the UK government has also advised people to avoid public transport with the consequence that (I heard) some London firms are looking at more parking to facilitate more car commuting – an opportunity for electric car ownership or maybe better rental, to resolve a dilemma.

Social Validation

An advantage of Pillar 3 action is that it can utilise institutional knowledge and assets as in a Campaign Organisation, making it possible to create focused strategic campaigns, including with the collaboration and cooperation of many people. A disadvantage is that it can appear 'tall but shrill'. It may embody a case by aggregating and mobilising a narrow section of society, and might manifest this through opinion polls or other statistics but it may not be much evidenced through 'real life behaviours', necessary to create ambient community level signals. Such campaigns can look as if they are not 'real' but 'mainly an online phenomenon' or 'on tv'.

Being locally present is part of the case for an '[Organised](#)' base of 'local' groups but if all those groups do is to articulate demands, rather than adopt behaviours aligned-to or consistent-with the demands, they can appear to be purely 'political'. In other words 'local' but still 'theoretical' or ideological.

The out-take from that may be to signal that this is something a *section* of people want but for which there is no evidence that if the demand was agreed to, it would be widely welcomed or that the intended behaviour would actually be adopted. Action speaks louder than words. Walking the talk makes it credible. Just aggregating the strongest ‘believers’ and showing them to other people may simply make it clear that ‘we are not like you’ (reversing the similarity heuristic). In contrast, organisations or movements which are socially embedded in ways that reach across differences, such as by providing community services, can avoid this problem.

An example of winning the media ‘air-war’ but not the political ‘ground-war’ is the way that the British green movement failed to repel a campaign by climate-sceptic politicians intent on disabling the government onshore wind programme, which has since spent four critical years in the doldrums (see blog [‘Killing The Wind of England’](#)). Opinion polling consistently showed high public support for onshore wind farms but there was no grounded community-level campaign to match the organised effort of a very small but very active and visible anti-wind campaign which presented itself as ‘community’ based and persistently lobbied local MPs face to face. (In 2020 the policy was again [reversed](#) but not completely, as market access was granted but planning obstacles remained in place).

In the paper [‘Tragedy or Scandal’](#), I explored how Extinction Rebellion UK succeeded in raising public consciousness of the climate crisis in 2018-19. XR’s ‘theory of change’ involved the ultimate top-down change of replacing the government, through ‘grass-roots’ mobilisation of several million ‘rebels’.

Yet even by XR’s own estimates, its national ‘rebellions’ only ever attracted a maximum participation of 30,000 over a week, and it deliberately eschewed any role for personal action, such as individuals buying green energy, or buying or renting electric cars. When in 2020 it switched to trying to ‘decentralise’ its tactics of social disruption (eg [in Cambridge](#)), it suffered problems of community-level rejection and had little social validation to give it strength in depth.

If Pillar 3 type campaigning is seen to grow out of Pillar 2 type social contagion, it has a legitimacy conferred by ‘community level’ action, rather than concerns of ‘elites’.

If politicians see people spending their own time or money on something it demonstrates that they ‘really care’ about it in an instrumental, not just an expressive way. Seeing it spread in ‘a community’ shows politicians not just that it is popular but that it has the potential to grow.

Politicians are well aware that what people do has an enormous effect on their opinions. Getting rid of fossil fuels has been hard not just because of the malign lobbying activities of the fossil fuel companies but because so many people have been using them in day to day life. By the same token, the more people take up alternative behaviours, such as buying or

renting electric vehicles, the more ‘political space’ there is to phase out fossil fuelled cars. The more obvious that behaviour change becomes – the more salient it is – the more it undermines the political grip of the fossil fuel lobby, making a top-down campaign effort more likely to succeed.

So when ‘bottom-up’ individual change begins to occupy ‘the middle’, being perceived as a thing ‘the community’ is doing, or ‘the town’ is doing, or a majority is thinking of doing, it triggers what public affairs expert, the late Simon Bryceson called “the law of political anticipation”: politicians react, not to events, but to what they anticipate will happen. In this way ‘consumer change’, rather than political theory or ideology, increasingly leads and catalyses political as well as retail decision-making.

Our mental model of politics may still say something like, ‘every few years politicians write a manifesto, voters are engaged at an election the politicians get elected on the basis of that programme which is the implemented in government’. If that was ever the reality, it isn’t now. Politicians are engaged in a [permanent campaign](#), and in government they often navigate government with the two crude yardsticks of popularity (staying on the right side of what the public want, in a constant back-stage trade-off with what vested interests want) and feasibility (what can be done). Big behaviour signals from the public act to lower the threshold to acting on evidence of feasibility.

Making The Invisible Visible

Unlike solar panels, green tariffs, along with ethical bank accounts and investments, are socially invisible, so just making this behaviour visible could in itself make a difference. Simple measures could change this, such as some sort of sign that a house is using green power. In the UK, homes of richer people used to have ‘[fire-marks](#)’: plaques indicating that the owners held private fire insurance, and showing the house was subscribed to a private fire service. That practice died out after public fire services were introduced and in past-obsessed Britain the plaques are now a treasured part of our built heritage, and a status symbol for householders.



House Fire Mark from Wikipedia – the Hand in Hand Fire & Insurance Society operated from 1696 to 1905

Some green energy providers do send out window stickers to customers but these are not very attractive, visible or durable. To work, such ‘signalling’ mechanisms would need to be well designed and appealing to householders, so they actually want to have them on their home. This would be a straightforward thing to research and brief, or run in a design competition.

Another approach could be to make statutory [Home Energy Rating](#) schemes visible. These already rate buildings by stars or A B etc grades depending on their energy efficiency in countries such as Australia, the US and UK. The certificate may be a legally required documentation if a building is to be sold. The rating could be mandated to appear on the outside of a building.

In 2015 before the Paris climate talks, I suggested that we could [require green pilot lights](#) on electric cars, to make them a more obvious signal of change. On 16 June Sky News [reported](#) that the UK government is to introduce a green flash on electric car number plates to encourage the switch. It’s great although I still like the green lights which could go on many renewable installations.

© Tuesday 16 June 2020 05:47 UK



The new number plates would have a green flash on the left hand side

From Sky News – Green Flash Number Plates

Catching People Doing Something Good

Drawn up for the Coastal Futures conference, the ‘three pillars’ discussed above are laid out as choices for an individual. However from a campaign organisation’s perspective, the biggest potential gain is probably to engage new audiences, drawn from people who are adopting behaviours aligned with change objectives but who are not engaged by campaigning. Working with these people can help diversify effective support for change as well as growing

it. Doing it successfully probably does not mean immediately trying to turn them into campaign activists or donors, but helping them become behaviour champions.

What does this mean in practice? Locate people doing something consistent with your campaign goals. It might be buying or renting an electric car. Directly or indirectly congratulate them for doing a good thing. Show other people that the behaviour is a good thing. Then encourage or enable the first group to do more by sharing their behaviour with others. It's not a highly sophisticated process.

This approach of 'catching people doing something good' is quite well known in business, used in [staff motivation](#), in [innovation](#), and in [politics](#). Marketers use it by directly or indirectly making people aware that 'people like you' (the similarity heuristic) 'also did this', or 'surveys show people doing A are X% more likely than others to do B', and making sure the people who see that have done A, in order to prompt them to do B.

Giving praise or enabling people to bask in reflected glory is also likely to make people a bit warmer towards the messenger (the liking heuristic). For some, probably a small minority, this might even make them candidates to convert into campaign activists but for many, the gulf between their personal lives (eating less meat) and what they often see as 'political' action (for example e-mail my MP about livestock farming), is far larger than many change campaigners realise. Those working in change organisations are surrounded by people with far higher self-agency than the great majority of the population and so overestimate the appetite for activism. But people are likely to be much more confident about sharing their new behaviours, especially with familiar contacts.

Different levels of self-agency and dominant needs among values-group act like a social sieve in sorting people exposed to a change-campaign proposition, leaving the end-of-the-line Transcender Pioneers as the group hugely over-represented in such organisations. (A process illustrated in [How Change Campaigns Get Populated By The Usual Suspects](#)).

A bonus with this approach is that although it might take a bit of thinking through and some research, you haven't had to first put in the time and effort to get people to adopt a behaviour in the first place. Strangely this is also why 'behavers' are often ignored by campaigns: triaged-out as 'that's happening anyway' and so they don't need attention. But with some positive feedback – a psychological reward – they are a bit more likely to do something else along the same lines (consistency – see also the [VBCOP model](#) linking values, behaviour, opinion and politics) and possibly reach out to others.

Potential Scale

On some issues the potential behaviour signal may be large. It may be much bigger than the number of people consciously engaged in explicit campaigns and change movements.

On climate for example, the numbers of people changing diet, or buying electric cars or signing up to renewable energy, are pretty big. As a result of the covid-lockdown experience, cycling has been booming in Britain, at least in some cities. (up [tenfold in London](#)).

Diet

Changing diet – which has multiple motivations – is large scale. In May 2020 polling company IPSOS [reported](#):

‘In a [global survey](#) of more than 20,000 people across 29 countries, more than two in five people (41%) say they’ll eat less meat or replace it with alternatives like beans in the next year to limit their contribution to climate change. Another third (35%) say they’ll eat fewer dairy products or replace it with alternatives like soya milk’.



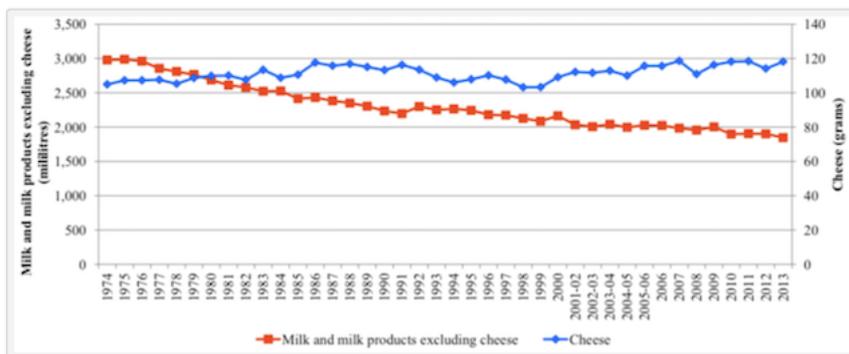
IPSOS Mori survey 7 May 2020

Interestingly, the survey also found that on both eating less meat and on less dairy, it was those in developed countries who were less willing, and those in developing countries who were more willing. In this case the question started by asking what people would be willing to do in the coming year to make a difference to climate change. But if any campaign has the objective of reducing meat consumption, with whatever aim in mind, the reason an individual has for changing diet does not necessarily matter. If they then share this in a way that encourages others to do the same, the contagion and escalation in numbers helps achieve that objective. ‘Market signals’ do not just influence commercial decision-makers but also political ones.



Elsie The Cow - the large US milk producer Borden filed for bankruptcy in 2020 (image from Wikipedia)

Globally the amount of milk produced and drunk is increasing each year but in the mature US market it is falling and has [declined 25% since 1975](#).

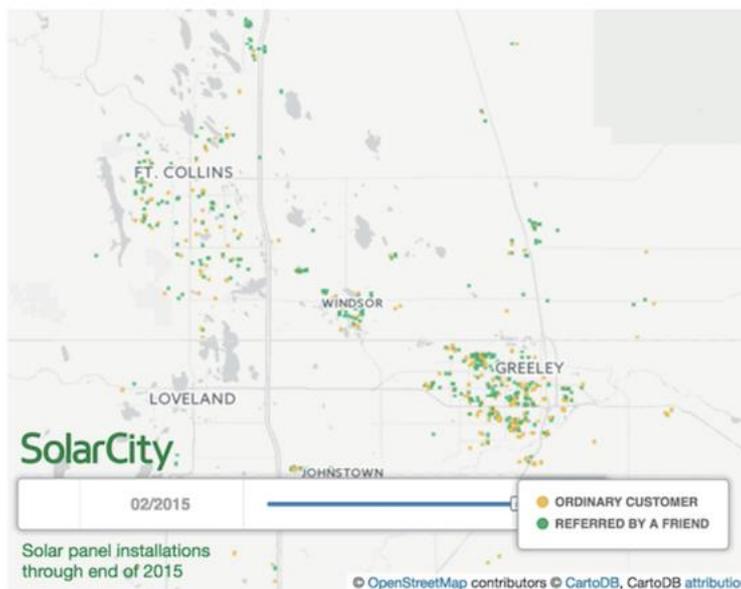


Falling UK milk consumption

In the UK, there is an even more pronounced trend of declining milk production in the UK (though not for cheese). Per capita UK milk consumption has fallen [50% since 1974](#), with non-dairy alternatives increasing.

Cont/

Green Electricity



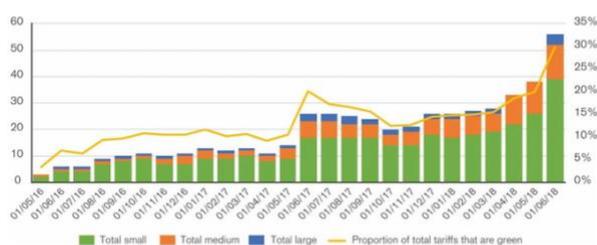
Animation of the spread of solar panels in a part of Colorado, from a [Vox article](#)

A well known case of the social-proof heuristic is the clustering of solar power installations on domestic properties – behaviour influenced by the example of neighbours. Some clustering is down to social housing provision but in private housing, it’s an individual decision. [This contagion study](#) of 60,000 homes with solar pv in Switzerland found that the more visible the panels were, the greater effect they had on encouraging others to get solar pv too. Similar results have been reported from the United States and Germany.

In the UK, as of 2018/2019, UK government data suggests some [858,000](#) – [930,000](#) households have solar pv on their properties, close to a million. The UK average household is [2.4 people](#) meaning that perhaps 2.3m live in homes with solar pv (about 4% of the population). These aren’t the only people with ‘their own’ renewable power – they and others can also buy ‘green tariff’ electric power from the grid. As of June 2018 [30% of tariffs](#) offered to UK customers were classed as ‘green’.

We have also seen an increase in the number of (mostly fixed) tariff offers labelled by suppliers as ‘green’, negligible in May 2016 up to 56 in June 2018 (see Figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9: Recent trends in green tariff offers by supplier size groups



Source: Ofgem’s analysis of Energyhelpline data

Note: Green tariffs are defined as those tariffs with at least 100% renewable electricity (some tariffs will have 100% electricity as well as renewable gas / carbon offsetting).

From Ofgem State of the Energy Market 2018

Customer numbers are harder to come by but www.comparethemarket.com says its (undated) research found one in seven UK households have switched to a green tariff (14%) and 31% were thinking of doing it. [There are](#) 28.4m domestic electricity customers in the UK so 14% would be around 4m bill payers. Chris Goodall of [Carbon Commentary](#) says he suspects the number of 'green tariff' households is now over 4m, perhaps 5 or 6m. [Octopus Energy](#) alone has over 1.5m customers and only offers green electricity.

Although electricity users 'going green' is not socially intrusive or politically disruptive activism as XR's escalating 'rebellions' were intended to be, it is a redirection of power generation. Although many electricity suppliers run 'recommend-us-to-a-friend' incentives, so far as I know, nobody in UK civil society has tried to engage this huge number of climate-friendly householders to go a step further into other climate-saving actions.

Other Behaviours

How much more 'consistent' behaviour change is going on? I don't know but on the environment, it looks like quite a lot. As I noted in '[10 Things About Covid and Campaigns](#)' the pandemic interruption of Business As Usual has prompted new behaviours which are more likely to last than the 'new ideas' it has surfaced, if these do not lead to new habits before a new normal sets in.

A much discussed area is transport. The official UK survey of environmental attitudes and behaviours has [not been updated since 2014](#) but a survey by a leading UK driver's association the AA, [found in May](#) 2020 that half of 20,000 drivers sampled said they would walk more and 40% intended to drive less. In April the President of the AA, Edmund King, [said that](#) anecdotal evidence on more working from home during the covid epidemic suggested that planned government spending on roads would be better spent on improving broadband, and in May he [called for](#) a roads pricing scheme to encourage drivers to switch to cycling. That's pretty amazing stuff.

In February a 'global' IPSOS survey (20,000 across 29 countries) [found](#) '71% of adults globally agree that, in the long term, climate change is as serious a crisis as Covid-19 is'. In June an industry analysis [forecast](#) global electric car rentals would increase 11% a year 2020-2024 despite Covid, and in April the electric car market overall was [forecast](#) to grow by 23% a year to 2027.

My intention is not to encourage anyone to campaign for electric cars – there are all sorts of view pro and con – but only to suggest that there are huge numbers of people changing their behaviours and the potential audience this creates this should be considered by change organisations.

Concluding Thoughts

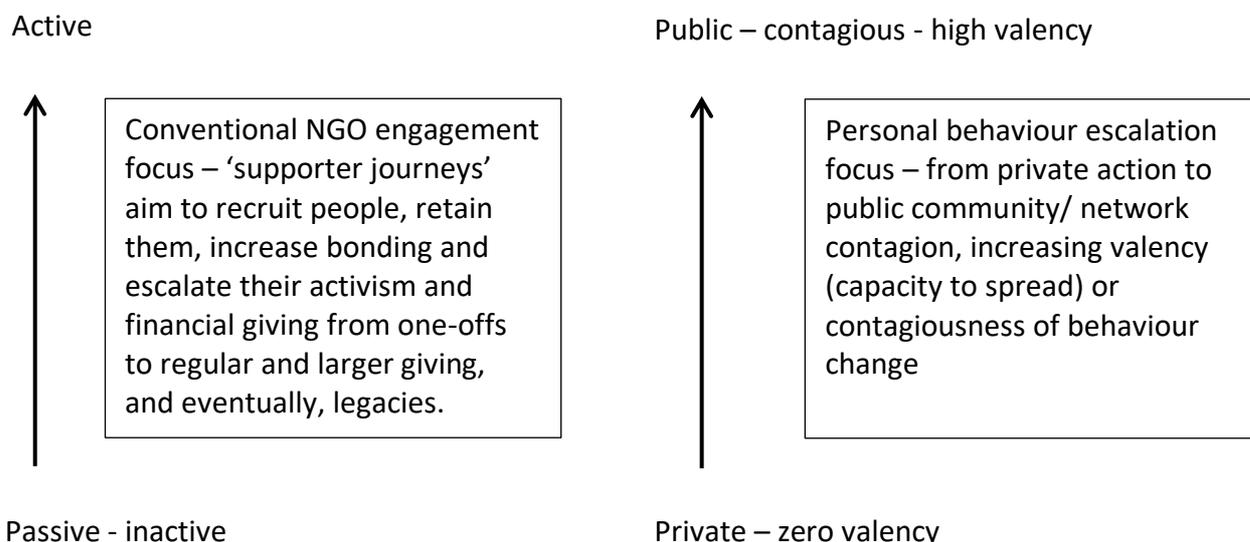
Escalating the effect of personal behaviour change could make a huge difference to many causes, campaigns and movements. It's a largely untapped potential and could have a catalytic effect on both 'top down' and 'bottom up' change efforts.

[Research](#) by Anne Owen of the University of Leeds shows that the signal of individual behaviour change in terms of household expenditure, can be detected in changing the UK's national carbon footprint. In other words, with a lot of statistical detective work, she confirmed the obvious truth that, at scale, individual behaviour decisions do have a big effect. For instance trends and fashions in consumer behaviour on the negative side, such as buying SUVs.

So why is this often fiercely denied by some theorists, activists and campaigners but promoted by others? It may come down to a combination of pre-existing ideological commitments and, just as important, methodological commitments to business as usual.

Business As Usual

A shift to spending time in the middle-ground of 'community' or 'network' behaviour escalation requires looking at potential public audiences in a different way, and doing public engagement which is not about donating or supporter activism.



The default public universe of a 'supporter journey' strategy (left) starts with a wide funnel and narrows it as commitment to the organisation is promoted. A behaviour escalation strategy aims (right) to spread the behaviour across the population, so it expands.

This may run counter to internal targets and priorities set to optimise income and take people along ‘supporter journeys’. An unintended effect, or at least, a rarely interrogated consequence, can be that the campaign develops and satisfies its own support and mobilisation bubble, and measures success by what can be done within that resource, rather than experimenting outside it. Promoting positive public behaviours beyond the bubble is often left to the market and government ‘public information’ campaigns, which may not exist.

Ideology

At least in the UK, the idea that campaigns have to choose between a bottom up or a top down approach is so deeply entrenched as a polariser and simplifier, that it’s hard to have a campaign strategy conversation without it coming up. ‘Behaviour-change’ campaigns, whose starting point is individual decisions, are often seen as bottom-up, and by many as not having much of an ‘up’ at all. But this is political not just technical.

The top down/bottom up dichotomy doesn’t really capture how a lot of actual change takes place but it mirrors a dominant political axis. At one end libertarians espouse individualism and personal responsibility, and at the other contemporary liberalism, socialism and some other isms. The former promoting less government and the free-market and the latter favouring government intervention.

In a country like the UK with highly centralised power, these political differences translate into ‘right-left’ party political choices. Without having to be explicitly acknowledged, these then colour and underpin the attitude of many campaigners to which strategies and tactics to adopt: individual behaviour change as a solution is often mapped onto the right, and government-action onto the left. Anti-capitalism also leads some people to reject any change which involves consumer choices.

A combination of these prior and often tacit commitments can make both campaign NGOs and self-styled ‘progressive’ social movements deeply conservative about their strategies and tactics. In this case it may mean they ignore individual behaviour change and the scope to escalate it at a community or network level, even where it’s aligned with their goals. So perhaps this potential will only be realised if new actors take it up?

Written before the covid pandemic took hold, [‘Tragedy or Scandal?’](#) looked at the ‘new climate movement’ of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion, and suggested that we need a complementary new ‘social movement’ or campaigns to leverage household expenditure aligned to goals such as action on climate.

Culture ?

Is the individual-bottom-up versus top-down dichotomy partly cultural? It may be. Perhaps it is not such a divide in countries which are less individualistic than 'western' Anglo societies, for instance in Asia where community acceptance tends to be an important norm in many walks of life, from business to family and possibly campaigns. I'd be interested to hear from others about that.

It would also be great to hear about examples of campaigns which already do try to escalate individual personal action

Some change organisations already set out to send these sorts of community-level signals and to encourage individual action. [Rachel Collinson](#) suggests the [Fair Trade campaign](#) or movement, as an example, maybe along with [Transition Towns](#). Fair Trade supporters have long set up displays of Fair Trade products in shops or community venues and got some towns to name themselves as Fair Trade Towns.



One way of making a movement locally visible

Finally, Bob Earll the conference organiser has also been doing his own experimentation. In 2019 he asked 93 delegates to the Exeter Marine Network conference "what actions are you taking personally" in relation to the climate emergency. His results are [here](#). The 93 individuals generated 299 responses, of which 72 concerned diet, 69 travel, 31 energy, 12 trees and gardens, 30 consumption, 23 activism (ie pillar 3) 29 plastics, 16 actions at work, 10 communications and 7, other things.

Bob has also produced two documents he'd appreciate comments on (please [contact him](#) directly). The first is [A Guide to Individual Action on the Climate Emergency](#) which includes a lot of information about other such guides and lists as well as his own. The second is a description of a very interesting idea by Maggie Bligh that he is piloting with friends, and was prompted by a desire to get rid of plastic in people's lives, and is called a [Can Do Café](#). Both of these are relevant to 'Pillar 2' behaviour escalation discussed above.

Ends

Thanks to Bob Earll, Chris Goodall and Rachel Collinson.

Please leave a comment if you have one and share this post if you find it interesting.

[1] The UK 'Coastal Futures Conference' was held in mid January. Organised by marine biologist Bob Earll, it's an annual event attended by about 400 people. The audience is mainly environmental professionals from conservation, planning, regulatory agencies and marine industries, along with some academics and and journalists.

Bob asked me and others to contribute to a session 'The Climate Emergency and How We All Respond', saying "There are three key messages that I would like the audience to take away from this session; 1.The Climate Emergency is just that and much more serious than people realise 2. Understanding the problem is important but now *How we respond now* crucial ...3. Since the societal and environmental changes will affect us all I'd like the entire audience to get the message that they can't leave this to somebody else to sort out and they need to act".

Earll has been running these conferences since 1994 and describes the audience (including himself) as 'habituated' to climate change as an issue. Well informed and professionally engaged but for many, until the 'Climate Emergency' broke as a dominant social issue, climate change was something they dealt with in their work silos rather than through 'political' activism or personal lifestyle change. Thousands of similar gatherings take place the world over. It's not a small 'audience' in itself. In the UK alone [the EIC](#) says it provides '373,000 good jobs' but others say the renewables industry alone employs 250,000. At any event, it's a lot.