



Swarm
Dynamics

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COMMUNICATING SYSTEM CHANGE

Learnings from *Animation Project: Jane and the Dark Cloud*

Above: Amber Cooper-Davies at work on our animation

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Learnings from Animation Project: Jane and the Dark Cloud

Background

This brief report captures the key communications learnings from the Activating System Change Research project led by Swarm Dynamics in 2021. An advisory group of policy experts and representatives from national campaigns was convened for a process of capacity building and co-creation of script and narrative for animated film examining what a system changing green New Deal might look like. We are grateful to the advisory board of researchers and campaigners who contributed to the framing of the animation. These advisors are listed on the project website which can be found at: www.gnd4systemchange.net

While the empirical evidence base for the communication of climate change through use of visual and verbal communication has been steadily growing in recent years, there remains a scarcity of empirical data on the effective communication of broader 'system change'. This is despite the growing prevalence of this catch cry from youth climate and other social protest movements, and a smaller number of professional NGOs. As indicated below, it is not clear to what extent corroborated communications findings from climate communications research, or more specific or single issue social justice campaigns (such as black lives matter or civil rights movements) might safely be applied to communicating system change and post capitalist futures. At the time of writing, several of our learnings and hypotheses are *new insights* or approaches that due to budget constraints we have not yet been able to test via audience testing research. Others are firmly grounded in existing communications evidence.

Insights and findings - communicating system change

The *target audience* recommended by the advisory group for animation 1 was broad. Participating campaigners and experts felt that the second half of 2021 was a moment to target a broad cross section of voters as well as campaign groups, including the broader left (beyond the green left) of working age. Some stated that we should aim to at least try to frame system change in a way that some conservative voters (at least the economically excluded segments) could relate to. To help overcome the political polarisation of a Green New Deal, and effectively link the solutions entailed by a more radical Green New Deal with the failings of the current paradigm that COVID19 has so starkly exposed. The storyline contains two protagonists, a female NHS worker (Jane) and a male worker in the gas sector (Dan). Utilising these 'types' was intended to help the animation speak to multiple working class audiences and voters of more than one gender. By presenting the relatable and topical daily struggles in the opening minute of the film, and returning this story throughout, we aimed to help achieve strong enough *audience identification* to maintain audience engagement throughout the more 'informative' and abstract middle section of the film. Several project participants and studies highlight the key importance of presenting credible messengers that the target audience could relate to - something environmental campaign films do not always manage to achieve (Nisbet, 2009).

We selected an animation artist whose signature style is the use of silhouetted characters, made from hand cut, back lit puppets. This aesthetic decision to use silhouettes to feature a diverse cast of working class characters experiencing different but connected struggles as a result of the current socio-economic 'system', was a technique we conceived to avoid the portrayal of characters becoming too politically or sub-culturally 'type-cast.' Our hope is that this will help a wider set of audiences and people from different values worlds 'see themselves' in the animation. To help overcome the still entrenched perception that environmentalism in the UK is chiefly a concern for the white middle class, we developed a cast of silhouettes aiming to suggest a diversity of ethnicity, gender, and to some extent, body shape (Jane is presented as larger woman and not a size 10 or 12 nurse) (Nisbet, 2009).

Regarding *form*, the creative concept we developed was one of partial storification - telling a basic but relatable human story, and utilising it as a creative spine upon which to hang a solid amount of information. One key objective in the narrative approach behind *Jane and the Dark Cloud* was to avoid the 'Hero's journey' narrative form. The script team, and several project participants observed that not only is this narrative shape overused by environmental NGOs, but it can make it difficult to achieve audience identification - remembering the evidence that a large segment of the UK population ('Settlers' in 3 Worlds theory) score low on self-agency (Cultural Dynamics, 2009; Rose, 2013). Some contributors to our workshops and animation script also felt that the Hero's Journey actually often makes it harder to incite collective action, or even positive reaction to a communication. This informed our decision to work with a '*Cinderella story shape*' instead. This narrative archetype portrays undervalued, oppressed yet worthy protagonists that people can relate to, who by the end of the story find some of their wishes answered in a transformed world, where their virtues become recognized. We felt this narrative form had potential to communicate system change - particularly to audiences of lower socio economic background, or people otherwise excluded or marginalised.

Making this Cinderella story from 'work' in a system change/GND campaign narrative context is one of the creative achievements of our film. Our narrative still portrays ordinary people coming together in support of social and environmental change, but with realistic levels of involvement and without pretending that bottom up changes will be sufficient. People who score low on self-agency tend to believe that 'leaders need to lead' (Cultural Dynamics, 2009) - and it is clear that the transformations necessitated by a Green New Deal will not materialise without strong political endorsement. It would be of benefit to audience testing research into how this story shape was received, and how the key framings and reform sets were understood by different demographics.

Evidence surrounding the communication of climate change demonstrates the importance of avoiding, or being careful with, the use of protest imagery in communicating climate change. Studies by Climate Outreach found it more effective to show people constructing solutions than to show people protesting, which prompted cynicism and fatigue (Clarke, Webster & Corner, 2020). Tversky & Kahneman (1992) also highlight that citizens are more likely to act for social

change when they feel more confident of the benefits that their actions will have, (efficacy) while they are unlikely to act simply because they are unhappy about their current situation without this prior confidence in efficacy. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that in historical social justice resistance movements, including civil rights in the mid 20th century, and in the visual communication and cultural remixing and meme-making by the Occupy Wallstreet movement after 2011, protest imagery *was* key currency for movement building, engaging wider audiences, and the unfolding story of class or racial struggle (Milner, 2013). It may be the case that after climate and system change movements have become more effectively personified with *dramatis personae* in the public consciousness, (which has only recently begun with figures such as Greta) that iconic protest imagery will become a more effective tool for engaging new and broader audiences than it has been for the climate movement so far. Working on this assumption, we decided to avoid protest imagery in the story of Jane and Dan, and instead aimed to show a coalescing movement of working class people coming together for social and political change, under the umbrella of a Green New Deal.

Our film foregrounds and explains the notion of *Just Transition* via the personal story of Dan – whereas fossil fuel workers traditionally rallied by climate deniers and right wing populists. Narrative strategies that put affected people in high carbon sectors at the centre of storytelling can, we hope, help overcome the political polarization of issues like climate change and a Green New Deal. We contrasted the insecurity of fossil fuel jobs (even though we didn't portray carbon risk to the gas sector explicitly in the storyline) with secure, unionized green jobs a GND would enable. **In year 2, it would be interesting and of benefit to gain research learnings into how fossil fuel workers in Just Transition regions reacted to the animation.**

The core *motivational values* woven into our animation narrative include: fairness, justice, health, 'hard working' security, community ownership, care, and time for family. Our framing of the new system we want as a '*caring economy*' was influenced by Focus Group Research conducted by our partner Women's Budget Group - which found very positive reception to this term and frame across genders and across demographics. (Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, 2020)

Another way in which environmental NGO storytelling often falls down is the failure to utilize mystery or curiosity to spark and maintain the interest of the audience. Unlike a research paper, the art of good storytelling sometimes means deliberately taking away some information or precision in the narrative to allow the audience to put together pieces of the puzzle. This was one of the functions of the metaphor of the dark cloud in our animation. We deliberately suggested, without overtly explaining, the meaning of the dark cloud, so as to keep the audience guessing and help balance the didactic elements of the film - knowing that it is the art of story, and rarely the information itself, that keeps people watching. The dark cloud is intended as multi-layered metaphor that can be read in several ways, as the cumulus of existential crises and fear of the future brought to a head by climate, toxic inequality and exposed by COVID19. At other moments in the animation we see the cloud fed by smoke created by cogs of the system and the 'run away train' of growth addicted extractive capitalism. We incorporated these visual

metaphors of air pollution based on research findings that images of air pollution can effectively communicate the links between health and climate, as well as non-climate issues (Clarke, Webster & Corner 2020:20).

Conveying an understanding of 'systems,' which are by definition highly complex and interlocking, presents challenges in the visual communication of system change. We fell back on the use of some visual clichés (cogs representing the system, visual allusions to heavy industry) believing that an existing and widely recognised visual metaphor *can sometimes* be the most time effective way to ensure clarity and comprehensibility of an idea. At the moments when the narrator refers to the current, unsustainable economic system, the visual language we used draws some inspiration from 'rich picture' style cartoons utilized in the popular political cartoon art of the popular Industrial Workers of the World worker movement of the 1920s and 30s. (see: <https://archive.iww.org/content/iww-cartoon/>) - personifying abstract notions such as corporate power and blending written text and labels with clear visual symbols and metaphors.

Our overall strategy, in light of post-Covid turmoil and the backsliding of political champions for a GND since the pandemic, was to lead with social justice issues people can relate to, firmly grounding the system change narrative in post-Covid topical issues and frames around essential workers and inequality, with climate messaging being woven in in the second tiers of messaging, not at the hook. In the story of Jane and the Dark Cloud we have experimented with trying to tell informative, but emotionally relatable, stories with several layers of meaning (George Marshall - *Don't Even Think About it*, 2010.)

The story of Jane and Dan is very much of the zeitgeist post-COVID and we hope it will be easy for people to relate to. The story taps into the sense of existential anxiety and worry that came to a head during Covid¹, and aims to link the way out of this emotional state with climate action and an explain key pillars of deep social and environmental reform. Last but not least, an ongoing objective of our charity it also to harness the power of an art driven approach - not dismissing the importance of aesthetics and '*beauty*' as important elements, to help maintain audience attention and inspire audiences. We are pleased to have demonstrated the potential and advantages of animation as a medium, with early feedback repeatedly describing our film as 'beautiful'. Audience engagement, suspension of disbelief, inspiration and beautiful aesthetics can be achieved in a myriad of storytelling devices through animation - and for smaller production budget when compared to a regular film of similar narrative scope.

Communications challenges and unanswered questions

During the development of script and screenplay, we discovered that a real tension existed between avoiding the Hero's journey, showing ordinary people struggling in their daily lives, and yet managing to tell a story of empowerment. Our concern to pass the 'authenticity test' made it harder for us to portray high levels of involvement or activism by the protagonists when they

¹ This month, thirty-two percent of UK adults reported high levels of anxiety about the future as we emerge from the pandemic (Welsby, Ogwuru & Kerai, 2021)

were clearly time poor (in the case of Jane) and struggling in their daily lives. This gets to the heart of the perception (still prevalent in parts of the UK population) that environmentalism is a middle class concern for white people. We therefore decided to portray actions and a level of involvement that would be realistic for people in the position of the characters, (such as joining a mutual aid group, and helping share information and actions in support of a Green New Deal online).

One of the campaigners on the advisory board noted that the brief visual portrayal of vested interests/faceless corporate elites could potentially be interpreted with a populist reading by some, yet we feel that it is very unlikely that a right wing population reading could be understood by anyone who watches the animation as a whole. Regarding the allusion to antagonists, on balance the advisory group felt it was important for the story to indicate or suggest vested corporate interests as part of the explanation for why, if it is such a good idea, we don't already have a Green New Deal.

Without audience testing we don't yet know how the aesthetic, including the use of the hand cut puppets as characters will be received by the target audience. It successfully escapes the fatigue of typical environmental aesthetic of green and brown. The animation artist identified a potential risk that the aesthetic lends a sense of 'fairy tale' or unreality to our film, but the efforts to portray a diverse cast, and elaborate relatable background scenes will hopefully overcome this risk.

Real challenges exist in being clear about what system we are trying to change (capitalism, or at least its current dominant extractive variants) and yet avoiding the trigger words or framings that often provoke knee jerk and polarising reactions. We decided to embrace the term 'system change' in our script, noting the increasing prevalence of this term amongst grass roots movements, and pointed to capitalism quite overtly in its visual portrayal, whilst avoiding words like capitalism/socialism themselves.

Lastly, we are aware that our animation doesn't tick all the ingredients often required for a video to go 'viral' (including use of humour, meme mixing and cultural mashup etc) unlike, for example the greenpeace Lego 'Everything's NOT awesome' viral video of a few years back. The experience of Greenpeace international is clear that information heavy content like ours, even when partly storified, rarely goes viral and shorter punchier videos that deliver a single punchy message, often by using humour, are much more likely to achieve mass circulation (Reestorff, 2015). Our remit was to create informative content for capacity building amongst grass roots campaigns, and to create engaging content that also has direct campaign utility. We are very pleased to have achieved this. We hope that both the content, and these learnings can be built upon for greater impact in 2022.

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