Communicating System Change

Communications Learnings Report From Year 2 of *Animating System Change*

November 2022

Photo: Animation artist Amber Cooper-Davies in studio, setting to work animating our script for 'Don't Tell Me to Just Breathe'

BACKGROUND

This report captures the key communications learnings, insights and ideas arising from year 2 of our project *Animating System Change*, aiming to create effective creative communications tools to help the advancement of 'system change' and, through involving experts in the co-creation, building capacity of environmental NGO partners on alternative economics in the process. At the end of this brief report is an Annex summarizing the findings of 7 in depth research interviews we undertook with representatives of large environmental campaign groups, to understand where their organisations were at on the topics arising from our film, as well as how they responded to our film, and how they viewed it's utility as a communications tool to advance economic system change. The interviews were compared against basic baseline mapping (based upon their organizational websites) of the extent to which post growth economics, and mental health, appeared as narrative or content links with their work. The core expert partners we collaborated on the script with this year were from CUSP (The Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity), with additional advisory and dissemination support from campaign groups WellBeing Economy Alliance, and UK Youth Climate Coalition. The experience of our research partners, both key players in the 'post-growth' and ecological economics space, has been that WellBeing economics is a frame/name that has so far had greater traction, or at least less resistance, among UK policy makers when compared to related frames such as 'degrowth,' and 'post-growth' economics. We focussed this year's film creation and capacity building activities on generating compelling narrative linking 'wellbeing economics' as solution set for 'system change,' and how to address the challenge of communicating system change through environmental lenses at this moment of high insecurity, war, and economic upheaval in the UK causing increasing numbers of people unable to meet their basic needs.

THE UNDER EXPLORED LENS OF MENTAL HEALTH

We identified and developed the novel lens of mental health as an underutilized, and potentially potent way to introduce and link the relentless economic system pressures, climate breakdown, and the urgent need for a wellbeing economy. Among our intentions, we sought to demonstrate to civil society groups how the still overly siloed factions of 'green' and 'social' movements might connect climate with economic system change (post-growth), via relatable, emotive political narrative conveyed in the form of lived experience of anxiety and depression. An increasing number of studies attest to the mental health effects of climate change, as well as the material, cultural-ideological and medical-psychiatric effects of neoliberalism[1]. The structural pressures of neoliberalism upon mental health can be thought about in two broad categories - 1) specific stressors resulting from insecurity and instability in areas of employment, family and services, which are often aggravated by the erosion of buffering structures that support mental health and wellbeing (a strong sense of community, family time, and high social capital); and, 2) the socialisation processes of consumer culture with its emphasis on extrinsic goals and market-driven identities[2]. The tendency of late capitalism to insist upon personal responsibility as concomitant to individualism has, in turn, framed anxiety and depression as an essentially apolitical, biochemical imbalance or result of personal history. Pointing to the influence of attitudes,

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[1] Lawrance, 2022.
[2] Butler, 2018.

values, and marketisation patterns of neoliberalism on the medical sector, 'the intra-psychic, relational, and socio-political implications of medical neoliberalism is understood to be profound; human suffering is all too easily recast in a disease framework and understood in economic terms'[3].

To date, progressives have not, however, fully explored the politicization or communication of these spiralling mental health outcomes as ways to potentially galvanize campaigns for economic system change[4]. In line with our desktop research, research interviews with mostly senior representative of national environmental NGO and campaign groups confirmed that very few environmental NGOs or campaigns are making explicit links with mental health and climate, or mental health/climate with post-growth or wellbeing economics. Accordingly, we were keen to understand why we accept the 'depoliticisation of distress' and whether highlighting its connections to our failing systems and looming climate breakdown holds potential as a leverage point to strengthen system change campaign narratives.

BEHIND THE FILM - RESEARCH AND CREATIVE DECISIONS

Our film, *Don't tell me to Just Breathe,* endeavours to weave many of the aforementioned threads together through the story of a young care sector worker. The 6-minute animation is primarily targeted at NGOs and civil society groups, offering a communication tool to help those who are not yet joining, or don't know how to join, dots between climate change and the logics of GDP growth-dependent capitalism. As a resource for campaign groups with national influence on policy, the animation offers mental health as a possible bridge between climate, economic and social crises and a means to explain post-growth economics in a relatable and meaningful way. The secondary target audience is young people who have, or know someone who has, suffered from anxiety or depression. The film can be viewed on Films for Action, or on this page on the CUSP website: https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/aetw/swarm-dynamics/

To move beyond the paradigm of separation that underpins the climate emergency, recent research underlines the need to pay the inner dimensions of system change equal attention to the external realms of reducing carbon footprints through technological advancement and eco-consumption[5]. One of the world's leading experts on trauma theory, Gabor Mate, describes the essential symptom of trauma, at its root, as a disconnection from self[6]. He goes on to suggest that our entire modern capitalistic, colonial, patriarchal societies exhibit symptoms of being traumatized. To heal current traumas and avoid further trauma of extreme weather events, forced migration and conflict[7], our animation enriches narrative approaches to conveying system change and invigorating desires for a post-growth world

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[3] CosGrove and Carter, 2018, p. 671.
[4] Fisher, 2009, 2016.
[5] Wamsler et al, 2022; Walsh et al, 2020; Ives et al, 2019.
[6] For brief introduction, see this 3 minute video trailer for The Myth of Normal (2022) featuring Dr Gabor Mate: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70HNmSsJvVU&t=66s
[7] 1,000+ clinical psychologists signed an open letter warning of the 'acute' trauma climate breakdown and social collapse will bring on a global scale, defending peaceful protest and civil disobedience, and calling for immediate action from the UK government to mitigate further damage https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdU6L3NM12ikT-34ZPlp1yv-6nHcM5aqhmid6nK-M3plZGu3A/viewform?vc=0&c=0&w=1

by telling a story of reconnection that tries to depart from the tired language and framings of 'new ageism'. Many of the great story archetypes, across all cultures, have reconnection with/ rediscovery of the true self as a key spiritual goal underlying narrative structure. By contrast, we consider that most environmental NGO storytelling entirely avoids the notion of reconnection with self, and with self-transcendence in general, with the exception of very cliched (if important) framings around the importance of reconnecting with nature. Instead, peoples 'higher order' spiritual needs are acknowledged by corporate brands, in an endless cycle of perpetuating a sense of lack. In our creative communications work this year, we experimented with weaving in this spiritual dimension into our film, with the repeated visual motif of the protagonist separating from her reflection in the window. A number of research participants responded that that was one of the features of the film they liked most, though we did not test for how this feature was understood.

Owing to the neglect of people's inner worlds in sustainability discourse, mental health has been a blind spot and has not been explicitly talked about in the context of climate or broader system change campaigns. While the angle must be handled sensitively to ensure the personal, subjective contributors/ causes are not dismissed[8], the majority of our research participants acknowledged the marginalisation of mental health in emergent discussions of the physical health effects of climate change and recognised its untapped potential to galvanize campaigns and motivate new or different segments of government and civil society to advocate system change theories and representative policy steps.

"How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank, if you can't get out of bed" is a provocative question formulated by thinker Johanna Hedva in her 2016 essay *Sick Woman*

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[8] Lawrence et al, 2022.

Theory. That question haunted us during the early weeks of conceiving this film. It seemed to speak of the often neglected impacts of the system upon people's mental health, as well as whisper something urgent about the inherent tension of working for campaigns or NGOs on issues such as climate change and post-growth economics while so many in our ranks struggle with anxiety and depression exacerbated by these existential crises and the inadequate response from the left to mount a challenge to the 'capitalist realism' (Fisher) that allows climate breakdown to unfold before our very eyes[9].

Taking inspiration from the recent report produced by a cross party working group for mindfulness, *Reconnection: Meeting the Climate Crisis Inside Out[10],* the central visual metaphor develops the room of the protagonist as a signifier for her mind. The creative approach centres on exploring notions of inner and outer effects of the system, and of system change. Unlike in our film from 2021, we decided not to show 'the system' in visual form but instead to illustrate its oppressive and destructive effects upon the people, climate, and future. As demonstrated famously by Lakoff and Johnson, the fuller meaning of a good metaphor is understood in the unconscious mind, where its subliminal pull enables more layers of associative or symbolic meaning than the rational/conscious mind can assimilate in one go[11]. Out of the small sample of research interviews undertaken so far, while not all grasped the full abstraction of her room signifying her mind, all clearly understood the key meanings of the outside system, including climate breakdown, oppressing and affecting the protagonist's wellbeing and mental health.

The world is held together more by the magnetism of stories, than the stickiness of facts. A plethora of research confirms that humans make the majority of decisions not on the basis of rational thinking or facts, but in response to often unconscious, affective motivational needs and associations[12]. As with most of our work, we tried to apply this by crafting an identifiable story first, allowing time for audiences to build connection and empathy with the character (even if this led to the film being slightly on the long side for a 'short') and placing the informational part about well-being economics only in the second half of the film, deliberately splitting the visuals and narration at that moment so as not to break the thread of her personal story.

As with our *Green New Deal reloaded* film from 2021, we tried to escape falling into the hero's journey archetype, part of our mission being to test and pilot other narrative forms that are not only less hackneyed, but which avoid some of the incoherent, if not problematic, mismatch between the celebration of the high agency individual and economic system lock-in, time poverty and the all-consuming strain to meet basic needs. Furthermore, we repeated the creative approach from last year's film regarding the visual depiction of the characters - using back lit silhouette puppets to intentionally avoid the pitfalls of identity politics or of unintentionally reducing the audience identification through associations with particular sub-cultures etc. The voice we chose however, is intentionally a young, working-class female sounding voice - aiming to speak to as broad a cross section as possible[13]. When asked, the majority of our research interview participants responded that they clearly 'connected' to the character, this being one of the 'tests' of any good story.

[9] Randall and Hoggett, 2019.
[10] Bristow, Bell and Wamsler, 2022.
[11] Lakoff and Johnson, 2008.
[12] Burke et al, 2018.
[13] Lawrence et al, 2022 – Women who seek to contribute to society or help people identified as particularly vulnerable to mental health impacts of the climate crisis

Our intention was for the film to begin where people are. We did this by using the simple hook of a topical, relevant question ('did you ever have the feeling that you just weren't strong enough for this world?'), portraying familiar daily struggles through the protagonist-narrator's experience, and intentionally placing climate breakdown second or third within the hierarchy of struggles and anxieties she is confronted with. A young female carrying out essential work in the care sector[14], the protagonist's diminished disposition and marginal position in society aims to highlight the absurd outcomes of growth dependence in very clear terms. During our development of the script, we imagined clear parallels between her own mental breakdown and climate breakdown in both the visual direction and sound design of the film, weaving in the findings of several studies that an increasing number of young people have reservations about having children due to fear of climate change and related breakdown[15].

Just as Joanna Hedva's essay (*Sick Woman Theory)* imagines a world in which interdependence is the norm, health is a collective matter and vulnerability is celebrated; our film presents wellbeing economics as a natural framework for the alternative systems we need to secure external-structural conditions conducive to collective mental health. Collective mental health can only be improved by transforming a system that sacrifices the climate, people's wellbeing and the future on the altar of eternal economic growth so that it respects boundaries of human and non-human communities[16]. As argued in *Post Growth: Life After Capitalism* – one of the primary sources of inspiration for this short film - a more multidimensional meaning of 'health' could replace wealth as the leading narrative guiding social progress. Acknowledging people's innate need for connection with self, nature, community and spirit/ God/ the universe to be of equal significance to normative conceptions of physical health, Tim Jackson suggests the interdependent dimensions of health offer pathways towards prosperity for all.

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[14] Informed by CUSP research into the financialization of the care sector, see Christine Corlet Walker, Jackson and Angela Drukman and Tim Jackson, *A Critique of the Marketisation of Long-Term Residential and Nursing Home Care,* 2022.

[15] Schneider-Mayerson and Ling Leon, 2020; Hickman et al, 2021.

[16] Lawrance et al, 2022.

Figure 1 – Jackson's envisaged prosperity as health: human functioning in five interrelated and interacting domains:[17]
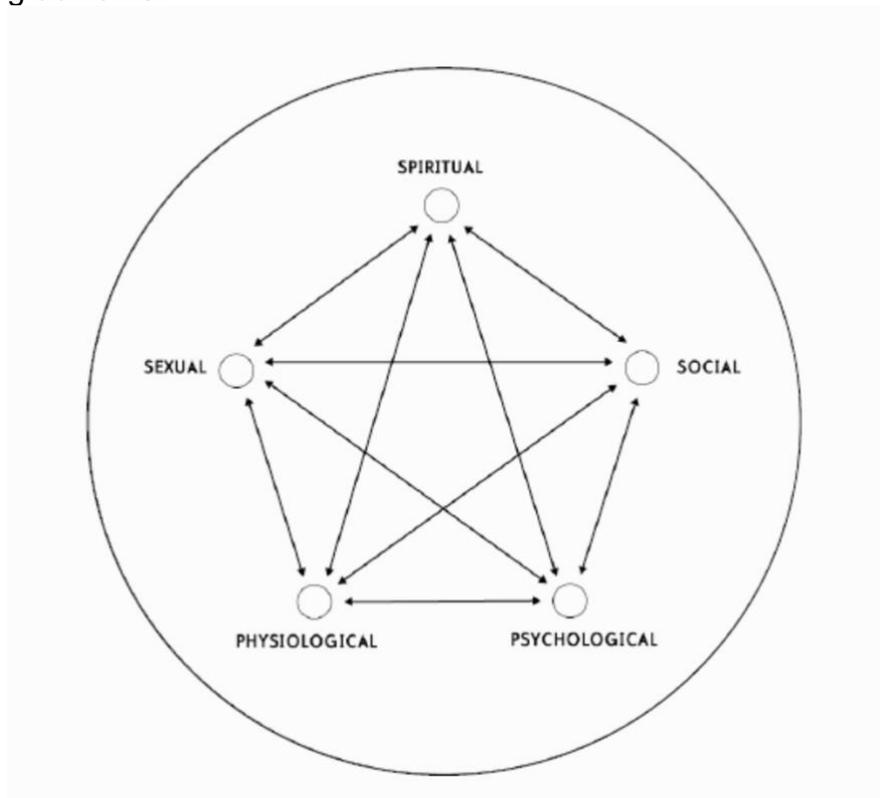
Alongside Jackson's book *Post Growth, Life After Capitalism*, discussions with CUSP highlighted a number of specific ideas within it that held narrative potential to help displace the normative hegemony of neoliberalism and its flawed characterization of human nature that the economy relies upon (values based upon "self-interest and interpersonal styles rooted in competition, a strong desire for financial success, and high levels of material consumption"[18] which give rise to socialisation patterns that diminish the communal, collaborative and creative capabilities of humans). One of these ideas was the little-known fact about how Darwinism and conventional economic theories came to be linked, based upon notions of human nature that recent science confirms to be incomplete or untrue. Although conventional economic theory is presented as immutable natural law, reflecting natural patterns of human behaviour, these behavioural assumptions can be traced back to a key sentence about human societies written by Charles Darwin that was itself both flawed, taken somewhat out of context, and influenced by the brutal capitalism of the industrial revolution that Darwin observed around him. Moreover, science about 'human nature' has moved on; proving that we are far more collaborative, sharing, and creative than neoliberalism would have us believe. While some might say this new science has started percolating into the mainstream discourse via science documentaries, it has yet to have widespread influence on the public imaginary. Several periods of rapid social change throughout history have occurred through the confluence and interaction of new discoveries in science, socioeconomic forces, conflict and crisis, and new aesthetic forms, resulting in cultural shifts. (Such as the enlightenment, for example, or the far-reaching influence of Darwinism on so many aspects of modern though). While we only had space for integrating

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[17] From Jackson, 2021, p. 63.
[18] Kasser et al cited in Butler, 2018.

these ideas in passing in the animation, they informed the visual approach of the second half of the film.

CONCLUSIONS

Our tentative conclusions on the campaign or narrative potentials of linking mental health, climate, and post-growth to advance system change can be summarized as follows. Our project, and the research and capacity building sessions held with large NGO representatives, confirmed the gaps - not only between mental health and system change within civil society messaging, but also the lack of effective approaches to communicating degrowth/post growth economics as the 'system change not climate change' we need. All of the research participants believed that there was untapped potential for communicating the arguments and research into mental health correlations as a way to galvanize campaigns and make more political space. As the representative from 350.org said, this untapped potential is *"analogous to the ways in which physical health impacts were mobilized in ways that helped create more political s pace for the climate justice movement".* One participant, when asked how the film made him feel, responded that it gave him a sense of hope *–"hope that someone had put the time into creating this film, that it was there."*

At the same time, all of the research participants raised some inherent sensitivities, and in the opinion of some participants, risks associated with mental health as a bridging lens, and for some this was an important caveat for how campaigners should approach the lens. Some of these were sensitivities we had identified at the beginning of scripting the film, while others were issues we had not considered. For one participant (communications regional manager of 350.org) the concern was more about protecting the messengers in light of the higher levels of stigmatization that exist, particularly if campaigns sought to mobilize real voices and faces of real people. He acknowledged that our film with its storified, fictional approach, avoided that risk. For others the sensitivities were further reaching, feeling that while it is vital to begin talking about it, care should be taken to avoid being perceived as 'weaponising' mental health or of exaggerating the extent of causality (versus correlation), as of course, everyone's story is different and there are multiple contributors, both personal and familial as well as structural, to anxiety and depression. When asked how they felt about the potentials before and after seeing our film, some, but not all respondents changed their initial answer, responding that the film made them think in new ways about narrative approaches to link these issues in effective ways. We therefore consider that the power of art, and of storification, is part of the solution to navigating these tensions, as well as being sorely needed in the struggle for system change. The medium of animation, and of relatable fiction (based on case studies and research) can weave story in ways that are not achievable with the usual NGO 'talking head' films, with the ability to take audiences on a journey that may otherwise only be achievable with larger budget film. We are pleased to have demonstrated that in this short film.

Report and the following research interview findings compiled by:

David Holyoake
Merry Fitzpatrick

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ANNEX
RESEARCH INTERVIEW SUMMARY FINDINGS

Methodology:

7 Participants from the following organizations were invited to participate in an online interview and discussion session of between 45 minutes to 60 minutes. Most were senior level from the following national organisations: Extinction Rebellion (Nathaniel Walters), 350.org (Mark Raven), Friends of the Earth UK (Joanna Watson), UK Youth Climate Coalition (Francesca Hutchin), Network of Wellbeing (Florence Scialom), and Climate Psychology Alliance (Julian Manley, and Dr Jamie Bird). Interviews began with a series of set questions to establish views, organizational positions and campaign histories. After some initial set questions, participants were shown the animated film we created during the middle of the interview, then asked a series of questions to gauge how they reacted to it, and whether it not it shifted their initial responses and views about the narrative potentials of linking these issues to help advance system change. Participants were given the option of answering from their personal view point or providing organizational positions. All chose to answer from their personal viewpoint, but also provided information on organizational work or and campaign histories throughout.

Key findings:

- All participants confirmed that the angle of mental health is a gap in both climate change and broader system change/post capitalist campaigns, with differing reasons provided as to why this might be the case.
- After watching the film, all participants agreed there was untapped potential to utilize mental health arguments and research into the correlations with capitalism and with climate change as a way to bolster campaigns and create new bridges between the green and social dimensions of system change. Most participants also qualified this assertion by also noting there were sensitivities to this topic that required some careful attention.
- All participants raised the issue of the stigma of mental health as giving rise to some important sensitivities that must be kept in mind when communicating these issues.
- The majority of participants (5 out of 7) said they would be either 'very likely' (4) or 'likely' (1) to share the animation online. One of these qualified that she would be more likely to share it from the social media channel of her organization than in her personal capacity due to only one hesitation - having friends involved in wellness activities such as mindfulness and yoga, this participant felt some concern that our film could be construed as 'dismissive' of the value of these personal tools, or of suggesting that anxiety and depression are always or usually responses to structural/societal pressures. A 6th participant said he would be likely to share it with a friend suffering from anxiety and depression, but probably not on the social media channel of the organization he represented (XR).
- 6 out of 7 participants responded that they felt a strong sense of connection and empathy for the protagonist after watching our film. The one who did not connect stated that she anticipated the purpose of the film and felt a bit 'manipulated' by its use of mental health arguments. This participant also indicated a higher degree of caution about the risks of deploying mental health arguments in support of environmental campaigns at the start of the interview, prior to seeing the film - due to

stigma. This participant also stated that there was a generational divide, with younger people more readily talking about anxiety and depression in the UK.

- At least 4 out of 7 participants stated that watching our film made them think differently, or more, about the narrative potentials for communicating system change. One participant who worked for XR stated that while the content and informational aspect did not teach him a lot that was new in his case, he did recognise a novel narrative approach in the way the issues of mental health, post capitalism, and climate were linked and storified in the film.

- When asked about emotional reactions to the our film, how it made them feel, several participants used words like 'more hopeful' and that it 'really resonated' with them. A number of these participants also indicated feeling a sense of some darkness or sobriety at the truthful ending of the film, which acknowledged the enormity of the challenge of shifting the current system, but were at the same time grateful for the honesty of this ending. One participant stated that the first half of the film made her feel grim or gloomy.

- Several participants mentioned they found the voice of the narrator/protagonist to be both believable and credible (this was not in response to a set question).

- The abstraction of the economic system and external existential angst via the imploding walls of the room of the protagonist was a highlight in the visual approach for most participants, yet not all grasped the full intended meaning of this central metaphor on a single viewing. Some understood it as conveying the sense of her mental state, while a greater number of participants understood its fuller meaning as also representing the outside system, including the reality of climate change, 'pushing in' to her inner mental state.

- When asked the question "what does system change not climate change mean for you?" it was noteworthy that 6 out of the 7 selected participants mentioned degrowth or post-growth as being either the crux of the system change needed, or a key part of the conversation. However, most also stated, or informed us when probed, that this was only their personal view, or the view of an increasing number of people within their organization, but that their organization (in most cases national environmental campaign groups) still did not have an explicit position on growth. In the case of the participant who works within Extinction Rebellion this reflected the decentralized structure and media strategies of the network, where a variety of voices and parts of the solution are curated and pointed to in the social media and video work of the network, but without locking behind a position on theoretical concepts like growth-degrowth.

- When asked about the prevalence of physical health arguments for climate campaigns over mental health thus far, participants pointed to the more recent emergence of the research base on mental health, eco anxiety and climate anxiety. Others noted the more abstract, subjective nature of anxiety and depression. One participant, the European regional communications manager for 350.org, noticed in their media monitoring, that research on climate anxiety had clearly broken into mainstream media awareness, whereas the research into the mental health impacts of 'the system' (be it defined as neoliberalism, or as late capitalism) had not broken into mainstream awareness.

- 5 out of 7 participants were highly complementary about the visual, narrative, and artistic approach to our animation. A 6th participant was clearly positive about the animation and creative approach overall, but felt a final edit was needed to achieve a punchier pace and opening hook. The one participant who was not so positive overall felt the first half was too depressing. 4 out of 7 stated that the film resonated

strongly with them, two stated it was "excellent" or "really great" and one commented that the narrative arc and careful linkage between mental health, the socio-economic pressures that contribute to it, and climate change was very well and 'deftly' handled.

- It was apparent that 5 (possibly 6) out of the 7 participants recognised the importance and novelty of what the film was aiming to do - bringing together storification, with mental health as a relatable hook to communicate post-growth economics as the solution for system change, and contextualizing climate anxiety within the broader angst perpetuated by capitalism. Most of these 5 participants correctly guessed the intended target audience was NGOs and campaign groups first, and wider public suffering from depression or anxiety second, and recognised the value of this short film as a demonstration of a kind of narrative work that needs to be done or explored by influential civil society groups wishing to advance system change.

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