

Article title: Can environmental documentaries make waves?

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Trump's first 100 days in office were, among other things, marked by a climate march in Washington DC that attracted tens of thousands of demonstrators. No surprises there. Since the beginning of his mandate in January, Trump has signed orders to roll back the number of federally protected waterways, restart the construction of contentious oil pipeline, and cut the budget from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Among the various orders and memoranda, the one signed to overhaul Obama's Clean Power Plan is probably the most remarkable, along with promoting coal extractions all over the US.

A good time, then, to follow up Al Gore's iconic documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which was released 11 years ago in a similarly discouraging political climate. At that time George W Bush, who is remembered for undermining climate science and for strongly supporting oil interests, was in power. In his own first 100 days at the White House, Bush backed down from the promise of regulating carbon dioxide from coal power plants and announced that the US would not implement the Kyoto climate change treaty.

This summer sees the release of *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*. More than ten years have passed and the documentary looks likely to be released in a very similar context. With republicans in power, war in the Middle East, and regulations on the environment to be reversed, this inconvenient sequel is a reminder that the climate of the conversation about global warming has not changed much in the interim.

But the strategies needed to grab the attention of the public certainly have. In the fast-paced, ever-evolving media landscape of the 21st century, knowing how to engage the public on environmental matters is no easy thing. The tendency of the environmental films that have mushroomed since 2000 has been to use a rhetoric of fear. But how effective has this been? Certainly, environmental activism has grown, particularly with the help of social media, but the role of these productions is unclear, and there is a lack of research on audience response to these films.

Personal planet

The selling point of *An Inconvenient Truth* was its personal approach. Although it had a lecture-style tone, this was a documentary that was all about Gore. He told his story entwined with that of the planet. It was extraordinary that people paid to go to the cinema to watch a politician giving a lecture. This was a big shift in cinema. Arguably, this format was enlivened by the way in which Gore opened up about his personal history.

The documentary opened with the politician's notorious quote: "I am Al Gore, and I used to be the next president of the United States." In November 2000 Gore had lost the presidential elections to George W Bush with an extraordinarily narrow defeat. The choice to run with a very personal rhetoric was certainly strategic – the right time for the former vice president to open up six years from that unfortunate election. Gore told the story of global warming through his personal life, featuring his career disappointments, family tragedies and constantly referring to the scientists he interviewed as "my friend".

This was a very innovative way of approaching the matter of climate change. We are talking about a politician who decided to offer an insight on his private life for a greater cause: to engage the public on a vital scientific subject. The originality of the documentary led to *An Inconvenient Truth* scoring two Oscars at the Academy Awards 2006.

Today, *An Inconvenient Truth* is seen as the prototype of activist film-making. Founder of the Climate Reality Project in 2006 and co-recipient of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize (with the IPCC), Gore and his movement soon became the core of environmental activism, gathering several environmental groups that, despite their differences, today march together for the greatest challenge of our time.

New hope?

Eleven years on, the revolution under Gore's lead that many expected has yet to be fulfilled. The next decade was beset with disappointments. More recently, the 2015 Paris Agreement has marked a new era for climate action, proving that both developed and developing countries are now ready to work together to reduce carbon emissions. But today there is a new protagonist – or antagonist – in the picture. The trailer for *An Inconvenient Sequel* shows Gore watching Trump shouting his doubts about global warming to the crowd and announcing his plans to strip back the EPA's budget.

It will be interesting to see how the tone of the film moves off from that of the original. The “personal reveal” tactic won't work so well the second time round. And a change in the narrative is certainly evident from the trailer. The graphs of the previous documentary are replaced with more evocative images of extreme weather and disasters. While statistics about carbon dioxide emissions and sea-level rises were predominantly used to trigger emotions in the audience, this time round Gore can show the results of his predictions. One example of this is the iconic footage of a flooded World Trade Centre Memorial, a possibility which was discussed by Gore in the 2006 documentary and criticised by many for being a “fictional” element at that time rather than an “evidence” of climate impact.

Unfortunately, I am not sure how much this shift will affect the public or whether the sequel will be the manifesto of that revolution that Gore and his followers have been waiting for. The role that the media have played in the communication of climate change issues has changed and developed alongside the evolution of the medium itself and people's perception of the environment. The last decade has seen an explosion of sensational images and audiences are fatigued by this use of fear.

Many look for media that includes “positive” messages rather than the traditional onslaught of facts and images triggering negative emotions. It has never been more difficult for environmental communicators to please viewers and readers in the midst of a never-ending flow of information available to them.

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