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Author

Jankowska, Marta Maja

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Editorial: The Global Warming Fight is “Bringing Sexy Back”*, Are You Ready?

Marta Maja Jankowska
Washington DC, USA

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Several people call it the “green fad”, some call it a revolution. Whatever ‘it’ is, something is radically changing the way Americans are viewing and reacting to global warming. In the late 90’s global warming was a washed out political issue that seemed to disappear from Americans’ radar of concerns. People fighting global warming were ripping their hair out trying to find ways to get people to care. And here we are today; hybrid car sales are through the roof, it’s all the rage to be ‘green’ in Hollywood, Christians are working to save the planet, and even the White House recently admitted that global warming is threatening polar bears. So what happened? It is my belief that global warming was never meant for politics, but that is where it got stuck in the 90’s. It was not until 2000 when our attention got turned elsewhere that the issue of climate change returned to its roots within the environmental, scientific and academic communities. There it could literally re-grow as a moral issue that resonated in a new way for Americans. In 2005 and 2006 concern about global warming exploded as Americans began empowered themselves and their communities through new forms of communication, sharing of ideas, and examples in every day life. America is finally bringing global warming back.

The Politics

Global warming has been tied to the Left ever since the euphemism ‘tree hugging liberal’ was coined. I distinctly remember heated conversations with conservative friends who saw global warming as a bunch of hocus pocus, and potential anti global warming laws as problematic for the economy, while I stood my ground being the good ‘tree hugger’ I was. We each prided ourselves on having open minds, but in the end we were both looking for the answer we wanted to see, the same answer that the political groups we belonged to deemed ‘correct.’ As exemplified by my friends and me, much of the rest of America’s opinions about global warming depended on party affiliation.

Global warming got caught up in politics initially because of its potential lure for voter turnout. The academic, scientific and environmental communities are a large part of the Democratic Party’s base, and as talk and research about global warming grew, the Party could not ignore the potential of global warming as an issue to get concerned voters to the polls. Of course there were Democrats who where concerned about global warming such as Al

Gore, but the party's overall performance in Congress did not reflect their publicized enthusiasm about the issue. Even though the Democratic Party platform specifically mentioned 'global warming' in 1992, climate change was not introduced into Congress as a legislative bill until 1997.¹ And whatever happened to the Kyoto Protocol? It was economically strenuous, but did that justify a 95-0 vote in opposition to the Protocol without a single Democrat speaking up?² While liberals were eager to point fingers at conservatives to justify the lack of legislation, Democrats were obviously not pulling their weight.

On the other side of the political trenches, the Republican Party was indeed actively hindering legislation concerning global warming. Where the Democrats took up global warming as an issue because of constituent interest, the Republican Party saw the potential harm to business and industry, likewise responding in a way that would appease the Republican base. Their opposition to global warming theory, together with inconclusive and questionable documents such as the Oregon Petition and Leipzig Declaration that only supported Republican questioning about the validity of global warming, eventually convinced many conservatives that global warming legislation should be resisted. Additionally, global warming was associated with those 'tree hugging liberals' who often voted and acted in opposition to conservative values further making global warming theory an easy target for the 'culture warriors' on the Right.

The politicization of global warming highly increased awareness of climate change in the 1990s, but it also completely stunted progress towards passing legislation in Congress and made people obstinate about their habits. Many liberals stubbornly pushed politicians to 'do something' about global warming instead of actively changing their own behavior, conservatives viciously opposed global warming simply on principle, and moderates and independents were forced to 'choose a side.' As exemplified by my friends and me, the controversy and political nature of the issue diminished reasonable discourse as we stopped critically thinking about global warming and fell into partisan collective ideology. What I observed during this time was that global warming was something fun to fight about, but it never gained the urgency necessary to make people change their behavior. As with most issues, it got boring and people stopped caring.

It Got Personal

At the turn of the millennium global warming moved out of the political arena, and started to recreate itself in a completely new way. In 2001 both Democrats and Republicans became busy with the War on Terror, social security, immigration, and other pressing issues, leaving global warming on

the political backburner. As a result climate change was able to quietly return to its roots as a scientific, academic and environmental topic of study and discussion. But this time global warming found a new friend; in dorm rooms, professor's offices, and geeky places around the nation, people were launching a new era in internet communication, discovering revolutionary ways to share and create not just information, but themselves. With tools like Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, blogging, and Facebook, the American individual suddenly became a force to be reckoned with.³ People started influencing the news, posting their thoughts, creating communities, and spreading information in never before imagined ways. The internet was no longer organized around information and web pages, but rather around *individuals* who posted snippets of their lives and the issues they cared about.⁴

The new communication network was a vital development in changing America's attitudes about climate change. Because so much of it started within the academic and scientific communities, global warming was one of the major issues circulated on these new websites. The global warming community spread information, projects, lifestyles, discussions, science, and concerns about global warming into every corner of the internet, all with a personalized spin. As the YouTubes and Facebooks grew, people started *interacting* with these communications. As a result, instead of feeling small and helpless in the face of a global issue, Americans were becoming empowered by knowing that somebody out there would be reading, watching, experiencing, and supporting their personal contribution to the fight against global warming.

Unfortunately, it would take an environmental disaster on the scale of spectacle to launch global warming back into the mainstream public eye. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated a small slice of the potential devastation that global warming would wreak in the future, and woke people up to what we were dealing with. Climatologists were suddenly in the center of the public spotlight and they did not hesitate to point out that while Hurricane Katrina was not proof of global warming, it could be a consequence, and it certainly did demonstrate how hurricanes would start looking when ocean temperatures around the world started to increase.⁵ Scientific support was added to by the personal experiences of victims. America saw the victims of Hurricane Katrina because of mainstream media, but they got to know them through the internet. As a result America saw that global warming was not threatening 'people out there', it was actively hurting our own. In the end Hurricane Katrina not only increased awareness about global warming, it made America *visualize* the potential consequences of climate change. And this was key; through visualization and interaction global warming ceased to

be an 'issue' and became a personal experience.

2006 saw global warming emerging as a problem that was personally important to much of the population. It was not enough that Americans saw global warming affecting their lives, they had to *relate* to climate change by seeing it, interacting with it, and dealing with it. In a March 2006 TNS/ABC poll 49% of people deemed global warming extremely or very important to them *personally*, and a further three in ten saying it was somewhat important to them. This statistic is up almost 20% as compared to 31% of people in 1998 who thought global warming to be extremely important.⁶ The new communication venues helped people root global warming in their personal lives and experiences. Concern about global warming spread like a fad in which it was cool to own a hybrid and be environmentally conscious. But this was more than a fad; people were genuinely caring about global warming and busy convincing others that they should care too.

Between 2005 and 2006, Americans started 'living' the fight against global warming. Discourse on global warming popped up everywhere from classrooms to chat rooms. Rising gasoline prices and an unpopular war in the Middle East spurred many to question our dependency on oil as well as the environmental impact of that dependency. Hybrid car sales increased by 161% in 2005 and 26% in 2006.⁷ Car manufacturers offered thirteen models in 2006 as opposed to the initial three in 2004.⁸ Major natural resource companies realized that to keep consumers happy they would have to start investing in diversified energy sources and letting their customers know about it. Visit BP's alternative energy site; you would not recognize that the company has anything to do with oil. Perhaps the largest indicator of exactly how far people were bringing global warming into their personal lives was the surge of religious groups and leaders who were framing the fight against global warming in God's terms.⁹ Global warming was ceasing to be something too big to handle; people began to deal with it on an individual level with individual choices. The creative manner in which people were infusing their daily lives with battling global warming in 2006 was astounding.

Bringing Global Warming Back

It is now 2007, which is predicted to be the hottest year on record. But those fighting global warming should not be discouraged. Rather we should look back on 2005 and 2006 and start learning the caveats of the new global warming movement. The days of global warming as a political issue are over. Americans are realizing in greater numbers that global warming is a real and threatening concern to our lives today, no matter what party we

belong to. Centrist Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recently said on *Meet the Press*, "there's always in history been people that are back with their thinking in the Stone Age...the key thing is to not pay any attention to those things...we know the facts, there's not any debate to global warming...we can slow it down or we can stop it, but only if everyone is working together."¹⁰ In the new global warming movement people are taking on global warming in their individual lives, and as more of us implement action, we start to work together as Gov. Schwarzenegger envisioned. Instead of feeling helpless we are empowering ourselves in new ways, most noticeably through the internet. With the internet, each person now has the power to report back to the world what they as an individual did to help terminate global warming, keeping a sort of worldwide tally. In a sense, it is not working together so much as it is encouraging, supporting, networking, and charting each other's progress toward diminishing global warming.

In 2007 we must continue to keep track of our individual and community progress using all of the media and communication tools that we have. When we work for legislation locally and nationally, when we learn something new about global warming, when we decide to walk to work instead of drive, when we protest, when we travel - when we do *anything* that in our own creative way fights or helps global warming- we must reinforce that decision, and we must share it with the world. Only through continued empowerment of individual choices can we sustain and expand the public's desire to actively diminish global warming. I challenge each and every one of you reading this editorial to find a new place where you can interact with the public. After all, you are the individuals at the front of the battle. Make a video, write a blog, join a community group, or create a profile; whatever it is you end up doing, make sure it is about *you* and your experience with climate change. Put your own "sexy back" into global warming and I promise, your action will influence somebody to change his or her behavior towards global warming in 2007.

*Timberlake, Justin. (2006). Sexy back. On *Future Sex/Love Sounds* [CD]. New York: SonyBMG.

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Marta Maja Jankowska, graduated from Whitman College in 2006 with a Bachelor's in Political Science and a minor in Chemistry.