

Philadelphia Story: Documentary film, community connections and green public policy support

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Documentary film is one tool activists can use to illustrate the damage caused by man-made pollution, as well as the benefits of applying more sustainable solutions to environmental problems (Miller & Allor, 2009). Penn State Public Media, which includes the production facilities for local public broadcasting affiliate WPSU, created just such a documentary. *Water Blues: Green Solutions* looks at the impact of modern cities on local water quality, and the promise of green surface infrastructure solutions.

The impervious surfaces that dominate large metropolitan areas result in rainwater runoff that exceeds the capacity of sewer systems. As a result, heavy rains carry sewage, street pollutants and other contaminants into local rivers. City planners often allow this to continue because it is less expensive to pay fines to the federal Environmental Protection Agency than to build the infrastructure necessary to handle the increased water flow. An alternative solution is taking hold: green surface infrastructure that captures and filters the water before it enters the runoff system. *Water Blues* explores this and other water solutions in a number of large US cities, including Philadelphia.

The primary goal of the documentary is to increase awareness and knowledge about the issue in local communities, with the hope that this will change relevant attitudes and behaviors. In this sense, the documentary approach echoes “deficit model” thinking (Sturgis & Allum, 2004). However, recent quantitative research has shown self-identity powerfully moderates the impact of knowledge on attitudes (Kahan et al., 2012; Kahan, 2013). This qualitative study explores the relationships among personal identity, issue knowledge, and attitudes toward green policy solutions in the context of a specific community—Philadelphia.

Two two-part focus groups were held with adult Philadelphians who had not seen the *Water Blues: Green Solutions* documentary. One group was made up of water experts and activists from the greater Philadelphia area, recruited via snowball sampling. The second group was made up of ordinary citizen volunteers who were recruited via newspaper advertising. In exchange for participation in extended research each individual was given a \$100 gift card. Part 1 of each focus group began with a series of grand tour questions designed to assess knowledge of, attitudes toward and proposed solutions for a broad array of public policy issues. Next, groups watched the documentary together. After viewing, each group reconvened for Part 2 of the focus group, and discussed their opinions about the documentary, including the main information they understood from watching it, and any changes in attitude they experienced after viewing it.

Results indicated increases in knowledge and awareness of the benefits of green surface infrastructure initiatives among both activist and non-activist groups. However, the salient information retained by the groups differed significantly. While discussion in both groups focused on the economics of green surface infrastructure initiatives after viewing the documentary, the conclusions drawn by the groups were quite different. The activists suggested the documentary illustrated the need for increased spending on green surface infrastructure projects. They believed it would make ordinary citizens who saw it more likely to support higher taxes to further improve the local water system. Non-activist groups, on the

other hand, were engaged by the money-saving aspects of the sustainability systems. They focused on personal-level changes they might employ in their own homes, and spent more time discussing programs with direct consumer benefits, such as distribution of rain water barrels.

Significantly, the activist focus group evinced deep belief in the deficit model thinking. They believed that providing more information about environmental issues was the key to getting more community buy-in for large-scale green surface infrastructure programs, increased hiring and increased regulation and enforcement. Non-activists discussions after viewing the documentary contained no suggestion that additional knowledge would make them more supportive of increased water protection initiatives, especially if they cost additional money.

The group comments illustrated disconnects in the perceived purpose and preferred outcomes communicated in the documentary film. These differences provide further context and qualitative complexity to the shortcomings of deficit model communication, in a specific place—Philadelphia—and in a specific context—water quality.

References

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