



Viewpoint

Environmental Slogans: Memes with diverging interpretations

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Abstract

Environmental slogans can be seen as memes, i.e. cultural constructs that, not unlike genes, replicate themselves from one generation to the next. Memes may, however, be divergently interpreted and some memes can even have unwanted side-effects. We wanted to find out how supporters of an environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) interpreted their slogan 'People Caring for the Earth'. During a celebratory event of one of the NGO's branches we asked 65 supporters of the organisation to write down their interpretation of the meaning of the slogan, as well as the actions that they regularly engage in to give substance to it. Fifty-eight per cent of the 34 respondents gave social-ecological systems interpretations of 'Caring for the Earth' and interpreted it as humans living sustainably with nature. Their associated actions centred around sustainable living principles. Forty-two per cent of respondents held strong nature-centric interpretations of the slogan, understanding it as a call to conserve species and ecosystems. Their associated actions centred around awareness raising and educating others. While these were broad patterns rather than exclusive, distinct categories, our results suggest that environmental memes should be used with circumspection, that their meaning should be clarified through actions rather than words, and that organisations should give as much attention to the meaning of their slogan as they do to the environmental causes they aim to address. The way environmental slogans are perpetuated within an organisation has implications for the membership they attract or deter.

Introduction

Memes are ideas, habits or fads that replicate themselves from one individual, generation or group to the next through imitation. In that sense memes are the cultural parallels of genes in biology (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins argued that successful memes get replicated because, like replicated genes, people who use them survive longer with a positive feedback loop between the habit and the meme. In a later essay, Dawkins (1993) likened memes to mind-viruses and explained how difficult it is for society to get rid of them when they become maladaptive or obsolete.

Some memes can be very stubborn or sticky, for example, modern advertising slogans such as 'Just do it', 'Have a break ...', 'A diamond is forever' or 'It gives you wings'. Many memes are harmless or even good, but some can have unwanted side effects (Atran, 2001). The swastika,

nowadays a symbol or meme for Nazism, was (and still is) also an emblem of well-being and good fortune in many cultures. Dating back 15 000 years, it had only positive meaning, before the Nazis assigned their own interpretation and propaganda to it. Another example of a meme gone rogue is 'Unity is Strength'; a seemingly admirable slogan until it became misused by the former South African government to unify white South Africans against the 'total onslaught', a purported communist conspiracy against the country's sovereignty. It will take many generations to overcome the resulting disunity. Memes are powerful communication and marketing tools and should be promoted and used with circumspection.

Environmental slogans such as 'Caring for the Earth' (IUCN & UNEP, 1991), also called 'Earth stewardship' (Chapin *et al.*, 2011) can be powerful memes. A call to voluntary, unselfish actions, where everyone shows leadership and takes responsibility to promote the long-term sustainability of Earth (Barendse *et al.*, 2016), 'Caring for the Earth' is used worldwide and in South Africa. It is variously used as a guiding principle for sustainable living (IUCN & UNEP, 1991), a yardstick for better policies for a more sustainable world (Robinson, 1993), a spiritual or meditation practice (Berry, 2006), a call for morality and citizenship (Rolston III, 2012), and a pathway to community resilience (King, 2008). It seems 'Caring for the Earth' has gained traction. But does it have universal meaning?

Methods

The slogan of the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) is 'People Caring for the Earth'. In July 2016, the Garden Route branch of this non-governmental organisation marked its 90th anniversary with a celebratory dinner, under the banner 'Celebrating 90 years of Caring for the Earth'. This presented an opportunity to test members' understanding of a slogan that all of them presumably subscribed to.

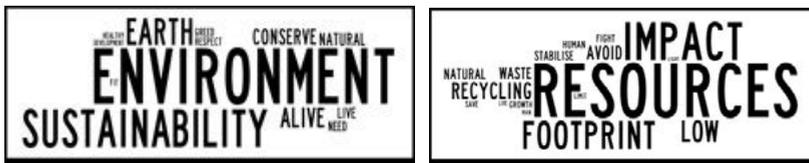
Sixty-five members and supporters attended the event where funds were raised by charging an entry fee. Attendees were white and mostly English-speaking South Africans in the 40–80 age group, except for two high school scholars and three university students who were in the 18–30 age group. After a brief introduction and verbally obtaining their permission, we asked all participants to write their personal interpretations of the slogan 'Caring for the Earth' on individual 80 x 120mm cards. In addition, they were asked to list activities they regularly engaged in – activities that gave substance to their interpretation of caring for the earth – on the reverse side of each card. Results were analysed using qualitative content analysis software (Atlas-ti) by labelling synonyms with the same code. Analysed results were visually displayed using word clouds that related the size of a word to the number of times it occurred in the sample (Shackleton *et al.*, 2016).

Results

Thirty-four participants completed cards, from which we discerned two broad categories of interpretations. Fifty-eight per cent of participants held social-ecological systems interpretations of the slogan. They saw it as a collective mission where people looked beyond their own

interest, and where humans and nature are part of the same system. Statements such as ‘keep Earth alive for all of us’, ‘sustainability of environment and development’ and ‘fit in with the environment’ were indicative of this understanding. This interpretation went hand-in-hand with an understanding that caring for the earth was about living responsibly and treading lightly on the planet. ‘Living with a light footprint’ and ‘limit our impact’ were typical comments, with recycle, save water/electricity, limit population growth as representative actions (Figure 1).

Figure 1. An all-embracing, social-ecological systems interpretation of Caring for the Earth emphasises sustainability, treading lightly on the planet and limiting our ecological impact. The relative size of a word indicates the number of times it occurred on cards in this category.



On the other side of the spectrum (42% of responses) were participants who understood the slogan as a call to conserve and preserve nature. This grouping included interpretations such as: preserving all species, conserving endangered species, eradicating alien plants, stopping littering and preserving nature for the next generation. Activities included protest action, campaigns to save endangered species, preserving wildlife, planting trees and bringing problems to the attention of the authorities. This group generally saw the solution as education and awareness raising, with comments such as ‘promote awareness amongst the youth’, ‘spreading the message’, ‘educating/teaching others’ as examples of activities (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A preservationist interpretation of Caring for the Earth emphasises conservation of species and natural ecosystems for future generations and focuses on awareness raising and education as solutions. The relative size of a word indicates the number of times it occurred on cards in this category.



Discussion

This exercise, despite the small sample size, supports the view held by Atran (2001) and others that commonly used slogans (or memes) such as ‘Caring for the Earth’ can be susceptible to inconsistent interpretations. It seems most people caring for the earth in the Garden Route have a broad, inclusive understanding of this slogan. They see it as a lifestyle choice that they act out by reducing waste and using resources sparingly. They typically see the responsibility for achieving this as everyone’s, with themselves as part of both the problem and the solution.

Other respondents, subscribing to the same slogan, held a more nature-centric view with a focus on species preservation, eradicating problems and protecting the Earth against human threats. People in this category tended to believe in education, fund-raising campaigns, protest and raising awareness among others as the solution to environmental issues. The two groups are not necessarily clear-cut and as distinct as portrayed here; a person can have a broad understanding of sustainability, be concerned about extinctions *and* be passionate about education and awareness raising.

What our quick survey did show is that even supporters of the same environmental cause might differ in their understanding of an internationally and locally used slogan, and that this may be associated with different actions as expression of such understandings. People appear to assign their own meaning to memes, and to act accordingly. This may explain why members of organisations may differ among themselves about where to focus their attention, in which case the slogan is not a universal rallying call. The ways in which environmental slogans are understood and given meaning through action, also have implications for an organisation's image, especially amongst its potential future membership base. The activities and actions of environmentalists could very well be more powerful than their slogan in influencing the stickiness (or otherwise) of a meme. 'Caring for the Slogan' is perhaps another cause to which environmentalists should attend.

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