



Peak Oil and Mass Communication

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The following is a guest essay on the role of media in expanding awareness of Peak Oil related issues by Kurt Cobb. Kurt speaks and writes frequently on energy and the environment and is featured on many sites including [Energy Bulletin](#) and [EV World](#). His personal weblog is [Resource Insights](#).



If you remember one thing about mass communication, remember this: Effective mass communication is sloganeering. Unfortunately, this truism makes mass communication a poor fit for a complex issue such as peak oil.

The main assumption behind much of the communication alerting people to the risks associated with world peak oil production is as follows: If people just understood the facts, they would take appropriate action. There are two problems with this assumption. First, facts by themselves do not explain their implications, their importance or their connections with other facts. Second, there are countless examples of human societies and individuals ignoring ample warnings of danger.

My experience is that many more people are now aware of the peak oil problem than just two years ago. Skyrocketing oil prices last year helped to propel the issue into mainstream publications and broadcasts. But even before the historic price rise, most people I met acknowledged that society's oil dependence is a problem. Most of them also shared a belief that

we have all the necessary solutions to that problem.

Therein lies a knotty obstacle. To convince such people that something other than benign neglect is necessary to address oil dependence, one needs not only to explain peak oil (which is hard enough to do), but also to debunk the myriad silver bullets that are currently on offer: ethanol, hydrogen, compressed natural gas, and unconventional sources of oil such as tar sands and oil shale. It is one thing to go through this process with a friend, family member, colleague or even a small group gathered to hear your case. It is quite another to attempt it with a mass audience.

It is certainly an appropriate strategy to take up an issue as complicated as peak oil with opinion leaders and policymakers. Convincing these groups of the risks of peak oil can in theory have far more impact than convincing well-meaning citizens who may not necessarily be networked with elites in society or with policymakers. For those who have tried this avenue, if they've gotten any favorable response at all, they have probably heard something that goes like this: "Yes, I understand how serious the problem is. But I can't even go near this issue until the public is better informed and ready to accept the difficult task of addressing it." Like the current White House resident, they are saying, "Make me do it!"

Which brings us back to the conundrum of peak oil and mass communication. Peak oil isn't one problem; it is a set of highly interdependent issues including oil demand, technological change, oil and natural gas exploration and infrastructure investment, consumer preferences, alternative energy, unconventional oil resources, energy policy, climate change policy, geopolitics and so many others. Sometimes peak oil is a stand-in for ideas about limits to growth, population and sustainability. Not everyone who utters the words peak oil has the same concepts and concerns in mind. So, it is no wonder that there is no unified message when it comes to peak oil.

And, even if there were agreement that peak oil is a serious problem, there would probably be no agreement on what needs to be done about it. For some, the marketplace will bring about the necessary energy transition, however tumultuous that may be. For others, massive government intervention in the form of subsidies and taxes will be necessary to move the marketplace in the right direction quickly enough. For yet others, the only hope is rapid and extreme energy conservation combined with the relocalization of production and commerce. These three general approaches in the order I've presented them imply increasingly urgent timelines. For some the peak oil issue is one that can be addressed over several decades. For others our response must be immediate and thoroughgoing to avoid extreme hardship for world society or at least to lessen that hardship.

With no agreement about the nature of the peak oil problem and no agreement on a set of responses and a timeline for those responses, there seems little hope for convincing the broader public that peak oil is a problem which requires urgent attention. If you ask someone whether they want to contribute money to help find a cure for breast cancer, that person will either accept or decline your request. He or she will not argue with you about whether breast cancer is a problem. Peak oil, however, does not fit into a category that people readily classify as a problem such as disease.

Another not inconsiderable impediment is that there is no peak oil study or advocacy organization with the resources to mount a widespread and sustained mass media campaign. One could say that the cornucopian lobby has so far fielded only sporadic efforts at a direct rebuttal of the peak oil argument. But this lobby has the upper hand because the cornucopian idea is embedded in nearly every advertising and public relations message to which the public is now subjected. The cornucopian assumption that we have virtually limitless resources is constantly reinforced by these messages, and the mass consumer society would not exist without such messages.

Why is this ongoing campaign so effective? Because objective circumstances such as currently low oil prices and plentiful, cheap consumer goods as well as recent historical experience tell the public that no matter how bad the current downturn is, growth and prosperity will return.

There is, however, reason to believe that public receptiveness to the peak oil message can and will change. First, objective circumstances such as the high oil prices of last year have created a more favorable backdrop for the peak oil message. And, new spikes in the oil price--which many in the peak oil movement expect in the next few years--will further erode the public's confidence in pronouncements of plenty. Second, the number of people who are aware of peak oil is steadily growing. And, the number of those who can speak with some facility on the topic has vastly expanded. This is important because mass communication of the peak oil message can really only make people aware that there might be a problem and cause them to seek more information.

Third, the Internet has become a vast repository of information about peak oil and responses to it. Fortunately, mass media campaigns have proven quite effective at steering people to the Internet for more information. Fourth, public confidence in reports from governmental sources and financial firms (both of which often evince a cornucopian view on energy) has been severely eroded by the ongoing financial crisis. That means there is an opening for the peak oil argument from so-called "non-official" sources that may be seen now as more reliable than the government or Wall Street.

Still, there remains the problem of what to say. There are many successful approaches for addressing people one-on-one or in small groups. These are outlined extensively on several peak oil sites, so I won't detail them here. When it comes to mass communication, however, the single most important factor will be a unified message.

One possible solution to creating a unified message might be to bring together many of the prominent voices in the peak oil movement, taking care to create a group with a wide range of views. The group, with the help of some facilitators, would work to find a set of principles, statements of fact and suggested responses that all can agree on. Do they agree, for example, that increasing local food production is an important response? Do they agree that alternative energy sources should neither exacerbate global warming nor endanger food supplies? Do they agree that the expansion of passenger rail ought to be a priority? Once a consensus is reached, the group would issue a joint declaration that would serve as a messaging blueprint for the peak oil community.

Some will argue that such a document would be watered down to the point that it would evoke little response from the public. That is why it would be important for the organizers of such a meeting to set some minimum guidelines for participation. One guideline might be that only those who have publicly stated that peak oil is an urgent problem would be invited. Another might be that they agree that no single approach can solve the problem. This second criterion would weed out most of the hired lobbyists and think tank pundits who toil on behalf of narrow interest groups such as the coal and nuclear industries. The event could also be by invitation only to provide some assurance that participants meet the minimum criteria.

The joint declaration itself would probably generate little media coverage. But with such a consensus in hand, it might be possible to coordinate a common message strategy which the entire peak oil community could get behind. It might also be possible to raise funds specifically for mass media efforts which would most likely emphasize public relations--that is, placement of peak oil related stories in major media outlets--and perhaps some paid advertising in carefully targeted venues. A consortium of organizations might be assigned the task of implementing such a

media strategy, or a separate entity funded by the consortium and/or wealthy donors might be created to carry out the plan.

The most important task of the entity charged with coordinating and executing any mass communication strategy will be to boil down the peak oil message into a few slogans and visual illustrations. That won't be easy. And, once that's done, having the discipline to repeat those slogans and spread those illustrations often and everywhere will be even harder. But with what's at stake, the peak oil movement must find that discipline or continue to limp along on the edges of the mainstream media and public consciousness.



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