Burying our heads in the sand won't work

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Climate change needs to be tackled now, yet collectively we just want to forget about it

THE CLIMATE change debate has burst back into the headlines with the publication this week of a report by the UK's broadcasting and communications regulator, Ofcom, that was highly critical of last year's Channel Four documentary, *The Great Global Warming Swindle*.

The film at the centre of the controversy was less a documentary than a polemic. Film-maker Martin Durkin set out to "prove" that CO_2 caused mainly by human activity was not driving climate change. This tested Durkin's creative skills to the limit; the programme makers have admitted to a series of "errors" in criticial graphs and data used in support of their arguments.

The programme also involved some questionable editing of comments by scientific contributors. Ofcom found that the UK government's former chief scientific adviser, Sir David King, did not say things attributed to him in the programme – such as global warming driving breeding couples to the Antarctic.

The film-maker also chose to exclude reams of evidence that contradicted his central thesis in order to cherry-pick a highly selective set of data and contributors to prop up his case.

While the scientific community seethed, the public reaction to *Swindle* was almost euphoric. Because it looked and sounded scientific, and had enlisted the unwitting assistance of some respected climate scientists, the Channel Four documentary reassured us that first, it's not our fault, and second, it's not so bad.

This of course is great news; it means we can simply continue our energy-fuelled lifestyles without a care in the world. Too bad it isn't true.

Durkin's documentary struck gold by using the timeless ploy of telling us precisely what we want

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to hear. At a fundamental level, vast problems such as global environmental hazards threaten people's sense of the continuity of life and our notions of who we are, what our values are, and what the future holds.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens calls this our ontological security, this sense of mental stability derived from the strong belief in there being an order and continuity in our lives. This sense of security is threatened by chaos and extreme anxiety.

Feeling positive and having an optimistic view of the future are generally desirable attributes. Paradoxically, these same feelings can paralyse us in the face of actual threats. Widespread denial is a common reaction to problems whose sheer scale is beyond our experience and when we lack the cultural mechanisms for dealing with them.

Sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard recently returned from a year doing fieldwork in a rural Norwegian community. In winter, she noted, "the signs of climate change were everywhere – glaringly apparent in an unfrozen lake and the first-ever use of artificial snow at the ski area". Yet nobody wanted to talk about it. "This was a paradox. How could the possibility of climate change be both deeply disturbing and almost completely invisible – simultaneously unimaginable and common knowledge?" Not wanting to know was, she wrote, "connected to not knowing how to know". Norgaard's observations strike at the heart of climate denial, and help illustrate the rich pickings to be had by the so-called sceptics.

At least part of the answer to what Norgaard observed lies in human neurology; our ancient so-called reptilian brain conditions us to deal with immediate threats with the classic flight or fight response. If your house catches fire, this powerful endocrinal response system improves survival chances.

This same system, however, dampens our responses to apparently abstract or slow-moving threats. Many environmentalists remain convinced that public education is the key. "If only they really knew, they would act" is a common belief. However, most people are already quite familiar with the problem; opinion polls show high levels of awareness, yet virtually no signs of behavioural shift.

Everyone, it seems, is waiting for everyone else to do something. So, like the hapless Soviets in 1941, we all sit motionless, hoping somehow that our fate will be averted, or at least postponed, to be borne by another country or generation. And when everyone appears to be doing nothing, that very inaction can seem reassuring.

Contradictory media messaging only adds to the sense of bewildered inertia. Newspaper articles warn us of the urgent need to change our ways. Turn the page, however, and there's a travel piece urging us to pop over to Dubai for a weekend on its ski slopes. Indeed, there is compelling evidence in the recent globalised intensification of lifestyles and consumption of what psychologists term "reactive denial". This involves resolving our internal feelings of guilt, conflict and fear by engaging in deliberately wasteful, reckless behaviour.

Economists describe the phenomenon of "temporal discounting" to explain how we overvalue the present by offloading the costs (and risks) into the future. This is odd behaviour, since that's where our children will live. They and their children will wonder why our generation, knowing all we know, did nothing to protect the world they must inherit. We could perhaps try: "It's not my fault, my reptilian brain made me do it."