

insight

An energy briefing paper

Public opinion – Energy security



Executive Summary

- Public awareness of energy security issues is low – and the issue is seen as less controversial than climate change
 - Once the term is explained, however, people are concerned that it is not high enough on the political agenda
 - People report that messages related to energy security are not being communicated clearly
 - They feel that the responsibility for action lies with government, rather than with themselves
 - People are generally supportive of renewables, but current coverage is creating uncertainty and the discourse between politicians, scientists and the media is causing people to switch off
 - People are unhappy about the UK's dependence on gas imports, with some open to nuclear power
 - Scientists need to take greater responsibility for bringing energy security onto the political agenda.
-

Introduction

Evidence suggests that climate change has dropped down the media and political agenda in recent years and, as a result, is seen as less of a priority by the public. Added to this, the coverage has in some of the public's minds shaped the issue as one of uncertainty, with most people having at best only a vague understanding of the causes and potential effects, or feeling that the science behind it is either confused, or contradictory, or both.

Research carried out for UKERC by the Glasgow University Media Group and Chatham House has revealed that there is widespread disengagement with climate change as a result of a number of issues.

In part this is rooted in the distrust of politicians - whose voices are heard most often on the topic, according to the research. Consequently, people don't trust what they hear and are also confused as to the causes and impacts of climate change. In addition climate change is not at the forefront of their thinking because other issues, primarily the economy, are higher up the public agenda.

The way in which climate change reporting has affected public and political opinion can provide useful lessons for improving awareness and understanding of the issues concerning energy security – a relatively new concept in the public consciousness and one where there is still potential to enable public opinion to form in a more positive, well-informed way – and perhaps achieve behaviour change in the longer-term.

Political agenda

Energy and energy security remain high on the political agenda, in particular as a result of higher energy prices, the level of energy imports, disagreement over the role of different energy options and concerns over depleting domestic energy sources.

Media coverage of domestic energy costs is substantial, along with extraction incidents such as the Deep Water Horizon oil spill and environmental disasters such as that at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan. However the public is more concerned about the high cost of energy bills than energy security.

In order to achieve current energy and climate change policy goals, the buy-in of the public is necessary. To achieve this there is a need to understand how public attitudes are formed, and how attitudes relate to behavioural commitments and, ultimately, the potential for change.

In 2011, UKERC commissioned researchers from the Glasgow University Media Group and Chatham House to study audience beliefs and behaviours in relation to climate change and energy security. The aim of the study was to examine the specific triggers for changes in patterns of understanding and attitude, and the conditions under which these lead to changes in behaviour.

This briefing paper focuses on the energy security aspect of the research

The project involved exposing members of the public to plausible yet extreme scenarios, using TV and radio broadcasts, newspaper articles and online content set in the future. These included a mass flood in Bangladesh, severe nationwide floods in Glasgow, and widespread blackouts across the UK, partly as a result of shortages of natural gas. The broadcasts and articles were put together with the help of professional journalists so as to be as authentic as possible.

Using group discussion, the researchers examined information sources that are typically used by the public, the extent to which they are trustworthy and credible, and the potential of different types of information to produce changes in behaviour.

Awareness

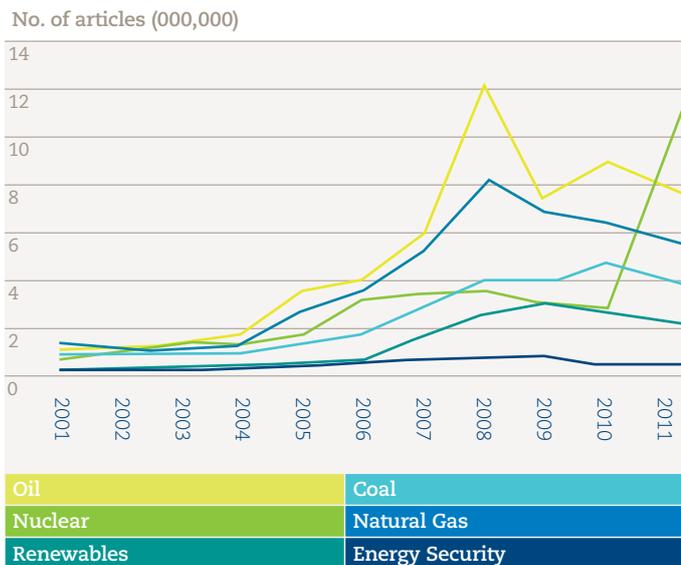
- Only a minority of people have ever heard the phrase 'energy security'

Only a minority of the 100 participants knew the phrase 'energy security' and had a fairly accurate idea of what it meant. Throughout the discussions, it was apparent that the participants' conception of energy security issues lacked any sense of crisis or a problem requiring urgent attention.

This lack of awareness was reflected in the media coverage of the issue – while there is a gradual increase in media use of the term, the level of coverage is significantly below that of the specific sources (oil, gas, coal, nuclear and renewables).

The majority of participants were concerned that the broader message – energy security – was not clearly communicated.

Figure 3
Articles Referring to Energy Related Issues



Source: Google media search 2012

Action and behaviour

- 94% of participants felt action should be taken to secure the energy supply
- But only 42% have altered their behaviour because of concerns over energy security

When asked to consider options to overcome supply most participants were uncertain. A priority was to reclaim the resources that the UK had sold off in the past. People were unhappy at the UK’s reliance on gas imports. A frequent question was whether further untapped reserves of gas in the North Sea were available.

People felt that renewable energy was promoted as a way of reducing carbon emissions rather than ensuring security of supply.

The participants felt that responsibility for action lay with governments, rather than individuals.

Only 42% of participants said that they had altered their own behaviour because of concerns about energy security – much lower than the two-thirds who had done so because of concerns over climate change. For those who had made behavioural changes, the focus was more on conserving energy.

Attitudes towards non-fossil fuel sources of energy

There was a general level of support for renewable technology although the consensus was that it was not yet efficient enough to cover the UK’s energy needs and a sizeable minority believed that renewables would never effectively replace traditional resources.

The incident at the Fukushima nuclear plant in March 2011 had re-opened the debate about nuclear, which was not rejected as an option but prompted questions about health and safety, and the safe storage of waste. Overall some participants were open towards nuclear, but this was tinged with wariness.

Response to a UK blackout

Out of the three catastrophic scenarios, the example of energy blackout across the UK made the biggest impact and was deemed to be the most frightening by the majority of participants.

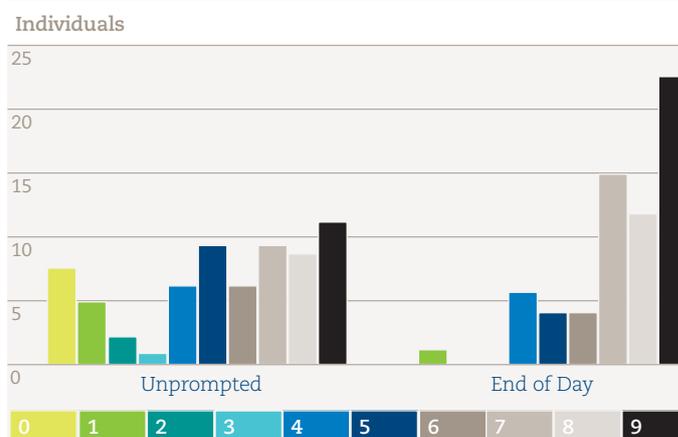
There was strong feeling that the UK should not have sold its assets in the past – the report only served to fuel respondents’ feelings of frustration.

The blackout scenario altered most respondents’ position on renewables and intensified the position of those who were already in favour of renewable energy. Interestingly, the extreme scenario encouraged people who were sceptical about renewables to become more open minded.

For a small minority, a nuclear programme was the preferred solution and the severity of the problem presented in the blackout scenario also encouraged some to put their doubts around nuclear to one side.

Across all groups the lack of an identifiable vision for the move to alternative energy sources became a key source of concern and a much more urgent problem to be solved.

Figure 4
Level of Individuals’ Concern on Energy Security



Source: Glasgow Media Unit 2012

Barriers and Conclusions

- People are committed to collective action – but will only change if it makes financial as well as ethical sense
- Distrust and cynicism of those in authority are a major barrier to behaviour change

Energy security suffers from low understanding and awareness. Media coverage tends to concentrate on aspects of different energy sources rather than issues around longer term availability or affordability.

This research suggests that people believe energy security is important and are broadly committed to collective action.

However, key factors in barriers to behavioural change include the current and widespread culture of distrust and cynicism about politicians and other authority figures, and the current economic climate. People are more likely to adopt behaviours which are both financially beneficial and ethically sound.

Recommendations

- There is an urgent need for a more effective approach to the communication of public statements about energy security, contextualised by scientific arguments about causes and risks. The politicisation of energy issues adds to public confusion and disengagement
- The genuine concerns that people have need to be tapped into and translated into altered behaviours
- Scientists have a major role to play in bringing the issue of energy security onto the political agenda, with politicians facilitating the debate
- The roots of all these lie in the communicative relationship between politicians, scientists and the media. This relationship is central to engaging the public and promoting individual action.



UKERC Publications reference: UKERC/BP/ES/2012/002

UK Energy Research Centre

58 Prince's Gate, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2PG

tel: +44 (0)20 7594 1573

email: ukercpressoffice@ukerc.ac.uk

www.ukerc.ac.uk

Energy Insights are occasional briefing papers on aspects of energy policy and research produced by UKERC. UKERC, which is funded by Research Councils UK, carries out world-class research into sustainable future energy systems. It is the hub of UK energy research and the gateway between the UK and the international energy research communities. Our interdisciplinary, whole-systems research informs UK policy development and research strategy.