

Anthony Van Witsen began his graduate studies wanting to know more about the relationship between science and mass communication. Working as a science journalist taught him that science does not always follow officially designated paths to make discoveries, and the working lives of scientists involve a great deal more than the laboratory. This is particularly true for science that involves some kind of public policy response.

He comes to MSU from the University of Wisconsin Madison, where he developed an interest in how some scientific discoveries come to be seen as relevant, risky, controversial, or a social problem, while others, which may represent an equally important intellectual contribution, do not, and the role mass communication plays in that process.

A dramatic example of these tensions is the gap between scientific agreement about the risks of climate change versus surveys showing some people cautious or even dismissive even as others are alarmed or concerned. This diversity of opinion should make clear that Bill McKibben's remark, "Climate Change is so obvious. Where's the outrage?" misses something important about how attitudes toward science and the environment are formed. At a time when groups of all kinds are seeking to justify massive changes in the name of global warming even before the costs of those changes are known, the question of how perceptions of the problem are formed is not merely an intellectual exercise.

For his master's thesis, he investigated the Wisconsin Sierra Club's campaign to make coal-fired electric power controversial in support of their goal of eliminating one third of all coal plants by 2020. The results helped clarify the struggle for control of the definition of an environmental problem and how one sophisticated social actor with a particular perspective formed its judgments about a complex policy proposal, then made those judgments seem authoritative enough to attract widespread attention.

Having worked at the place where message frames about science and environmentalism are created and exert their impact on audiences, he hopes, in pursuing a PhD, to extend this research into areas where media influence public attitudes that make environmental science controversial or not. He is particularly interested in learning more about visual framing, which is not as well researched or understood as framing expressed through language.



Figure 1 Anthony in one of his better suits