

How to Shape Our Communications: The Psychology of Messaging about Global Warming

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The basic scientific facts about global warming have been settled for years.¹ Ninety seven percent of climate scientists agree that global warming is real and is caused by humans.² Yet the views of American adults about global warming have been static, essentially, for the last decade.³ Public actions in response to the scientific facts have been slow to form and inadequate, thus far, to meet the challenge. Why?

- A well-financed counter movement exists, and – by its political contributions, misleading propaganda, and subsidies to “merchants of doubt” – the counter movement has confused the issue;
- Many environmental groups and charitable foundations have been slow to prioritize and focus their attention onto global warming; and,
- Many political leaders have not realized that to delay, compromise, or be inconsistent about energy policies that contribute to global warming, increase the risk of a climate catastrophe.

Psychological Perspective

Psychologists maintain in addition, however, that another reason for inadequate action is because climate scientists and activists have used ineffective communications strategies to teach the facts and make the case for individual and public action.⁴ For example, psychologist Per Espen Stoknes identified five barriers to action that climate communications commonly create:

1. **Distance:** The climate crisis is characterized as remote – a problem for people and animals that live in far-off places (think Pacific Islanders and polar bears);

¹ In this essay, **global warming** is defined as the average warming of the Earth’s atmosphere, and **climate change (disruption)** is defined as the totality of impacts – sea-level rise, ocean acidification, loss of sea and sheet ice, drought, flooding, etc. – caused by global warming.

² See <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

³ According to the Pew Research Center, in 2006, 69% of adult Americans said “there is solid evidence that the Earth is getting warmer”; in 2015, 68% said the same. In 2006, 41% said that “global warming is caused by human activity”; in 2015, 46% were of the same view. And in 2006, 41% of Americans said “global warming is a very serious problem”; 2015, 47% said the same. See http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/16/catholics-divided-over-global-warming/pr-2015-06-16_popeenvironment-01/

⁴ This essay draws primarily from Stoknes, Per Espen. *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishers, 2015. See also, Marshall, George. *Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014.

2. **Doom:** Climate disruption is framed as an approaching disaster that can be addressed only by personal loss, cost, and sacrifice;
3. **Dissonance:** Fossil energy use is identified as the cause of global warming, appropriately so, but without considering how that fact, if stated without any recourse, conflicts with what people normally do – e.g., drive gasoline-powered cars, travel by air, and heat and cool their homes with fossil-based electricity;
4. **Denial:** Communications do not anticipate or avoid the possibility of triggering self-defense mechanisms whereby people – in order to take refuge from fear and guilt – negate, ignore, or otherwise avoid acknowledging unsettling facts;⁵ and,
5. **iDentity:** Climate messages have not considered how people filter information through their professional and cultural identities. In general, people: (a) look for information that confirms their existing values and notions; (b) filter away what challenges them; (c) override the facts; and, (d) resist calls for change in their self-identity.⁶

In short, the psychological view of global warming attributes non action to popular cultural resistance: (1) large numbers of people distancing themselves; (2) seeking to avoid costs and dissonance; and, (3) denying the reality of information that conflicts with their self-identity. Overcoming cultural resistance, Stoknes asserts, will provide a tipping point, also known as a “cultural swerve,” at which time many people will rapidly engage in individual and collective actions to solve the problem. Recent events, such as in the campaign for the 2016 Presidential nomination among Democratic candidates, suggest opposition to accepting the science of global warming is declining and interest in the issue is growing, but even if that is true, using psychological insights to reshape climate science messages would help to speed acceptance of science and to encourage actions to reduce the risks of a climate catastrophe. Stoknes suggests “turning the barriers on their heads” by reshaping communications in various ways:

1. **Distance:** Reference facts to make global warming feel near, human, personal and urgent.
2. **Doom:** Frame the issues to hopeful and supportive ways.
3. **Dissonance:** Provide opportunities for consistent and visible action.
4. **Denial:** avoid triggering fear, guilt, and self-protection.
5. **iDentity:** Reduce cultural and political polarization.

⁵Although denial is commonly thought of as a barrier to action among political conservatives, liberals can also deny unsettling facts about climate disruption that would have them change their political priorities or engage in public demonstrations.

⁶Dan M. Kahan is a leading researcher and author on this subject. See, for example: Kahan, Dan M. and Braman, Donald, “Cultural Cognition and Public Policy.” *Yale Law & Policy Review*, Vol. 24, p. 147, 2006; Yale Law School, Public Law Working Paper No. 87. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=746508>

Based on psychological research, five strategies for effectively communicating about global warming are as follows:

1. **Social Networks:** Reach out to invite relationships and build coalitions, cosponsor educational events, and create political alliances with individuals and groups that share common interests. Peer relationships are emotionally powerful motivators to action. Social norms – the knowledge, imagined or real of what others would say and do in your situation – can remedy feelings of helplessness and passivity. Make climate communications as “social, interactive, and local as possible.”
2. **Supportive:** Employ frames of the global warming problem, individual actions, and public policy positions that support “can-do” emotions. “Fear and loss don’t sell,” and “Uncertainty kills determination.” New and better frames, more conducive to action, are “insurance, health, security, preparedness, and, most of all, opportunity.”
3. **Simple:** Make climate supportive behaviors as easy and convenient as possible. Use “green nudges” such as, for example: (a) making public transportation faster, easier, and more comfortable than higher-emission alternatives; (b) providing consumer information about the advantages of saving life-cycle costs in energy efficiency; and (c) making consumers of electricity more aware of their energy habits and of the economic and environmental advantages of conservation behaviors.
4. **Story-based:** Use the power of story-telling to tell the tales of, for example: (a) heroic eco-entrepreneurs, clean-energy inventors, and policy-innovative jurisdictions; and, (b) to imagine green growth, ecological restoration, and a sense of the sacredness of nature.
5. **Signals:** Employ indicators for information feedback that are closely tied to the larger stories of societal transformation. Examples are signals for green growth, well-being, ethical stewardship, and re-wilding. Two recently published documents help to clarify and embolden our vision beyond the economic and ethical systems of the status quo to a future when economics and ethics work to protect the natural environment, particularly the climate: they are, Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*⁷ and Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*.⁸

Conclusion

With the risks of severe climate disruption already high and growing, we in the Climate Stewards of Greater Annapolis can and should draw from research by psychologists to strategize and reshape communications with the general public and relations with like-minded groups.

⁷ Klein, Naomi. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

⁸Francis I. Vatican City. See at

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html