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AAAS Headquarters
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Overview

Twenty eight social scientists and climate communicators gathered at the headquarters of the American Association for the Advancement of Science to discuss how research can improve public engagement on climate and identify remaining gaps in knowledge. This summary and the [full report](#) of that conversation are now available.


This advice is limited to the questions social scientists have explored. Practitioners also contribute to our knowledge, albeit in less formal ways that are sometimes insightful, sometimes misleading depending on the circumstances.

Key Tactical Take-Aways

Emphasize consensus: Social science research demonstrates that communicating the fact that 97% of climate scientists have concluded that human caused climate change is happening serves to increase concern across ideological lines.

Foster empowerment: For people to act on climate, they must not only feel it is important, but also believe that problem is solvable and their actions can make a difference. Yet these beliefs are low among even the most concerned. Start by building efficacy among those who are ready to act.

Engage peers: Humans are highly attuned social animals. We cue our own actions off of those of others, as well as the social expectations of our community. On climate, people trust those whom they know. Set an example, establish norms, show action is popular, activate networks.



Beware of backfire: Persuasion attempts can entrench ideological identities. Since climate is divisive, carefully pre-test message, messenger, and mode of contact.

Change the default: Changing behavior by changing minds is difficult. Few people will opt in to a new behavior if doing so seems inconvenient or more expensive. By making climate-friendly options the default, few people will opt out even if doing so would cost them less.

Known Unknowns

Social science experts in public engagement agreed that there is a great deal we still do not know about the relationships between beliefs, values, knowledge, and behavior. *How best to leverage personal experiences with climate change? How to overcome fatalism? How to tailor outreach to diverse audiences? How to convey risks and motivating emotions without fear, demoralization, polarizing or disempowerment?*


What Does this Mean for Advancing Climate Communications?

Among challenges for practitioners are polarization, industry-backed misinformation and pseudo-experts, lack of efficacy, and human tendencies to interpret complex issues through pre-existing identities and ideologies. Many practitioners recognize the importance of clarifying scientific consensus and the utility of scientists as messengers for some audiences. At the same time, practitioners are diversifying messengers and messages to connect with stakeholder values, concerns, and aspirations. Researchers and practitioners emphasize the need for experimentation, sharing results, and compelling solutions narratives.

Key Strategic Take-Aways

Match the opposition's efforts: We must equal those opposed to climate action, who have invested in research and communication infrastructure, evidence-based strategies, and message persistence and discipline.

Synthesize and disseminate: Existing academic and field research requires systematic synthesis and sharing instead of siloing and out-of-context consumption (e.g., “study of the day” fads).



Collaborate: Even the best-synthesized research is no substitute for researchers and practitioners collaborating on field trials and program evaluation. This may require redoubled efforts by current players and possibly a new applied research “shop.”

Plan with agility: At the cross-organization programmatic level, inconsistent strategic planning needs to be replaced by periodic systematic assessment and updates on what is working, what is not working, and how the landscape is changing.

Fund long-term: Sufficient and consistent funding is needed to better coordinate strategy, conduct more experiments, facilitate evidence-sharing, retain experienced talent in the field, and take successful trials to scale.


Communicators are working in a highly competitive environment. This means more sharing of what is known to work, collaborating on research to discover new insights, and incorporating knowledge into ongoing strategies robustly funded for the long-term.

Moving Forward

The gap between climate communication research and practice has contracted recently thanks to groups such as the Climate Advocacy Lab, Climate Access, George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, Climate Nexus and many others. Initiatives are underway to spur evidence-based campaigning, create more compelling narratives, track research trends, and promote collaboration between social scientists and practitioners. But all players face resource constraints, and the rapid evolution of the field makes planning and coordination across organizations and campaigns difficult.

Scaling the “bridging” capacity of service providers is key given practitioner’s often limited time and expertise in applying research to outreach, coupled with researchers’ limited knowledge with social change campaigning. This produces siloing between what is emerging from the field of practice and in social science scholarship. In both campaign design and evaluation, there is potential to bridge these silos by partnering with service providers to ensure a more systematic approach to identifying, applying, and validating best practices to maximize the effectiveness of climate engagement.

For full report and list of attendees, see www.climateaccess.org/resource/toward-consensus



Overview by: **Cara Pike** | *Climate Access* —&— **Justin Rolfe-Redding** | *Skoll Global Threats Fund*

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