

# How to deal with climate skeptics 101 -- 12/22/2010 -- www.eenews.net

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Climate science isn't just about carbon dioxide anymore.

An increasing number of scientists who spend their days crunching numbers, running computer models or collecting samples are looking to develop another skill: transforming themselves into "deadly communications ninjas of climate science."

That was evident last week at the American Geophysical Union's fall meeting in San Francisco, which included a special emphasis this year on the getting the word out on climate change -- and getting ahead of climate skeptics who dismiss the idea that the climate is changing and human activities are driving the shift.

At one session, journalist Chris Mooney exhorted more than 200 scientists packed into a stuffy conference room to commence their "ninja training." Their model? According to Mooney, it's the "highly trained, well-paid, talented communicators who are committed to winning the issue in the media in a way scientists aren't willing to yet" -- in other words, the skeptics.

Lost in Translation		
<p>Consultant Susan Joy Hassol specializes in helping researchers talk about their findings in plain English. She's helped scientists write several major U.S. and international climate reports.</p> <p>Along the way, she's compiled a list of more than 100 terms that mean one thing to scientists and something very different to the man on the street. Many of the examples on the list make scientists chuckle, Hassol says, but there's another common reaction: "The scientists do see themselves in it."</p> <p>Here are a few of Hassol's favorites:</p>		
Term	What the public thinks	What scientists mean
"Greenhouse"	A place plants grow	The warming effect created by heat-trapping gases
"Aerosol"	Spray can	Tiny particles
"Positive feedback"	Result of doing something well	A vicious cycle

He and other experts laid out the ground rules: Don't expect to convince everyone that you're right. Do expect to spend less time in the lab and more time dealing with questions from journalists, the public and lawmakers. And don't be surprised by an uptick in harsh or just plain nasty e-mails from critics.

Take the examples offered by Michael Oppenheimer, who directs the Program in Science, Technology and Environmental Policy at Princeton University. His lecture on scientists' role in public policy included a smattering of the messages he's received. One began with this greeting: "First of all, I must say you look like Bozo the clown." Another, with the subject line "Commie maggot," read: "Commie maggot, die slow, die hard."

"Those are the nice ones," Oppenheimer said, in jest.

But the tone linking many of the talks and workshops in San Francisco wasn't self-pity. It was tough love, mixed with practical advice on speaking plain English (see *table*).

"Theory"	Speculation; a hunch	An established understanding of how something works
"Model"	A good-looking person who markets clothing	A computer simulation
"Ozone"	The ozone hole	A heat-trapping gas

## 'Calm the tone of the debate'

"Charlie Brown just keeps coming back trying to kick the football," said Walt Meier, a research scientist at the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colo. "He doesn't punch out Lucy. He just keeps trying to kick the ball. I think that's what we need to do."

Meier believes that scientists often err by refusing to engage those who don't agree with them.

"From a scientist's perspective, the sense is, 'We're the experts. You guys don't have an understanding of the details of science, so why should you be put on equal footing?'" he said. "But a lot of people [who disagree with mainstream climate science] are very passionate and intelligent -- and when they get ignored, the sense is, whether or not it's true, 'the scientists think we're idiots.'"

Meier now spends some of his free time responding to blog posts that are critical of NSIDC data or other aspects of climate science. While it might not always change minds, "I think it does help calm the tone of the debate," he said. "And it can stir up good questions."

Climate scientist Michael Mann of Pennsylvania State University also counseled his colleagues not to shy away from critics, drawing on lessons he's learned defending himself against sustained attacks on his work from skeptics, including congressional Republicans and Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli (R).

After the release last fall of e-mails stolen from the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit, for example, Mann published an op-ed in *The Washington Post* rebutting claims that the messages undermined the fundamental conclusions of climate science. He credits that piece, in part, for spurring an editorial echoing that view in the journal *Nature*.

"When scientists fight back, there may be others who are watching who are willing to take a stronger stance," he said.

That doesn't mean that reaching out to the public is a natural fit for researchers who may feel uncomfortable translating their work for laypeople or concerned that their colleagues will perceive them as hogging the limelight. There's also no guarantee that such efforts will sway public opinion.

Recent polls offer conflicting portraits of how climate change is perceived by the general public.

The Pew Research Center for People and the Press released results last year that showed a 14-point drop between 2008 and 2009 in the number of Americans who believe there is "solid evidence for global warming," from 71 to 57 percent. That number rose slightly this year, to 59 percent, but don't mistake that for a rebound, said Pew's director of survey research, Scott Keeter.

## Dealing with the partisan split

Pew's polling also shows deep splits on climate between Republicans -- who tend to doubt climate change is real or believe that, if it's real, human activities aren't driving it -- and Democrats -- who tend to

believe human activities are warming the planet.

"I think if I were a scientist, I'd say, 'We need to do good work to figure out how to deal with global warming -- but we also need to figure out how to communicate better with the public,'" Keeter said.

Meanwhile, Stanford University's Jon Krosnick has arrived at a very different conclusion. His surveys show "large, and sometimes huge, majorities" of Americans who believe that humans are influencing the climate and the government should act to limit warming.

In August, for example, Krosnick reported that more than 70 percent of Americans in Florida, Maine and Massachusetts say they support government limits on greenhouse gases and think a rise in the world's temperature is caused "mostly or partly" by human activity -- results that mimic conclusions of national surveys he's conducted.

"There's a lot of worry, a lot of handwringing, a lot of soul-searching going on among the natural science community saying, 'We are failing. We need to find a better way to communicate [with the public],'" Krosnick said. "You can imagine that these folks have something to offer, but I think it's a mistake to say they've been failing."

Scientists would do better to focus their outreach on lawmakers rather than the general public, he said.

"What I'm talking about is what leads a legislator to vote for a bill, to co-sponsor a bill," he said. "That's a whole set of issues I just don't hear the natural science community thinking about or talking about."

[Back to Public index page.](#)