

Communicating climate change motivating citizen action

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Introduction

Nearly twenty years ago, when climate change had just begun emerging on the public and policy agendas, two-time U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William Ruckelshaus commented on the need for governments to help lead in the transition to a more sustainable interaction of humans with their environment. He argued that while governments are critical in setting priorities and policies, and in modeling the new behavior, civil society is absolutely indispensable in bringing about this profound change. He also recognized—as the above quote suggests—the challenges of communicating and engaging civil society in this task.

Two decades later, many argue that the federal governments of North America are falling short of the needed leadership on climate change. In fact, if one presumes the role of a democratically-elected government to be governance in the common interest, then it could be argued that the United States in particular is failing its citizenry. In the absence of committed top level leadership in the United States, bottom-up pressure is building to force policy changes at the federal level. There is growing evidence of an increase in action on climate change at various levels and in various sectors of U.S. society and one could argue that a social movement for climate protection is slowly emerging in the United States. Society in that sense is beginning to take up a truly civic responsibility in a democratic society where elected leaders do not represent the emerging majority will of the people: to push the government to act in the common interest and model alternative behavior. But social movements begin small and U.S. (and Canadian) society is not yet fully on board regarding the need for comprehensive action.

This paper focuses on how civic engagement on climate change can be fostered further, and uses the U.S. situation as a testing ground. Clearly, civil society alone will not be able to address the challenges posed by climate change. But civil society has two critical roles to play in climate policy and action: it can (1) mobilize for policy changes at higher levels of government, and (2) enact behavioral changes consistent with needed mitigation (and adaptation). This article also rests on an argument made more fully elsewhere that those who could encourage such engagement have not communicated climate change effectively enough to generate widespread mobilization.

In the next section I lay out why effective communication is essential to bringing about these two types of civic engagement. The third section focuses on specific communication strategies that can increase civic engagement and illustrates these with best practices and examples from the North American context. It also discusses how these strategies can help overcome some of the barriers people experience that may prevent them from engaging the issue of climate change. I close with some thoughts on how the immense challenge of climate change—through the communication and civic engagement it demands—may serve a much-needed democratic renewal in U.S. society.

Communication and Civic Action

Linguistic Roots, Practical Linkages

Communication can play an essential role in mobilizing and sustaining civic action. As such, communication expresses and supports the fundamental work of civic engagement in a democracy. A first approach to this deep linkage is through language: communication and community share the same linguistic root. Etymologically, the word “to communicate” derives from a Latin word that means “to impart,” “to share,” and “to make common;” in turn, the word “common” derives from the two roots—*com-* “together”, and *munia* “public duties”. This etymology links communication closely to the ideal of civic action. Practically, communication and community can also mutually foster each other, whereas unsuccessful communication can alienate individuals from acting in the public sphere and hence

completely fail to be an instrument of citizenship. Thus, communication needs to be designed and executed effectively, if it is to be a useful tool in building and sustaining the community that acts on a *res publica* (a matter of public interest) such as **climate change**, and in helping individuals create, and feel part of, a civic community.

For the purposes of this article, it is useful to borrow from the “civic renewal movement” literature the distinction of “being a citizen,” i.e., in a narrow sense merely being an individual member of a city, country, or otherwise defined community, from that of being one who “participates in civic action.” The former may be quite divorced from public and political life and relegated to being a self interested individual acting on his or her own needs and wants, **consuming** goods and services, and otherwise ensuring that these personal desires are met (through complaints, advocacy, volunteering, or the singular political act of voting). In that capacity, of course, people can help reduce their energy use and reduce their use of technology that produces greenhouse gas **emissions**. The role of communication in this case would be to foster individual behavior change. Someone engaging in civic action, by contrast, is an individual whose actions are committed to, done with awareness of, and in support of, a larger social, common, public goal. Differently put, civic action is public action by members of a community in response to a public matter of great concern. Or as Boyte and Kari put it, civic action is “public work”—work done in public, by the public, of the public, and for the public. “Public work’ is work by ordinary people that builds and sustains our basic public goods and resources—what used to be called ‘our commonwealth’”.

Communication plays a critical role in such “public work.” How we speak about the issue that concerns us, how we talk with one another, and how we articulate the solutions to the problem make all the difference. Communication is the most basic means by which we express the focus of civic action. It helps create a lens through which we view the matter of concern as well as understand its deeper causes, implications, and solutions. It develops and feeds on social capital. As a means to create common cause and understanding, it makes connections across issues and thus helps build a public that is engaged on **climate change**.

Common Obstacles to Civic Engagement on Climate Change

For communication to achieve all these objectives is no small order. It is difficult enough to communicate the unwieldy problem of global **climate change** to various lay publics; it is extraordinarily difficult to overcome the lethargy, habits of thought and action, and institutional arrangements that underlie our current energy-consuming, **emissions**-generating behaviors. For individuals to become civically engaged political actors adds the challenge of overcoming widespread disenfranchisement from the political process, so commonly observed in contemporary U.S. society. In short, there are internal (psychological and cognitive) processes that may prevent an individual from engaging on this issue, as well as social, political, and external structural barriers to such engagement (see Table 1 for a brief discussion of common barriers to civic engagement on climate change).

This list of barriers to civic engagement discussed in Table 1 is certainly not complete, but highlights some that are critical to consider when designing communication campaigns that aim at mobilizing individuals to participate in civic action. Understanding these barriers more fully can give communication efforts a clearer focus and infuse them with a longer “shelf life” than the average 10-second sound bite or 10-month outreach campaign. The role communication can play and the strategies one may employ build on the recognition of these reasons for inaction.

Table 1: Common Barriers to Civic Engagement on Climate Change.

<p>Psychological cognitive barriers</p>	<p>Internal processing of climate change information may undermine motivation to engage on the issue. De-motivating emotional responses to climate change information commonly include: a sense of being powerless and overwhelmed, denial, numbing, a belief of being exempt from the threat, blaming others, wishful thinking or rationalization that the problem will resolve on its own through the help of experts, displacement of attention on other problems, apathy, fatalism, and other forms of “capitulatory imagination”. These types of cognitive and emotional responses are particularly common in response to issues which are scary, ill-understood, difficult to control, overwhelming, and in which people are complicit,</p>
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	<p>such as global climate change.</p> <p>Common cognitive barriers include not understanding the issue (causes) or not seeing the relevance of climate change impacts or solutions to one's daily life; misunderstanding, confusion, or disagreement with the actions, policies, or strategies proposed to address climate change; an unattractive future vision painted in people's imagination (often one of doom); and lack of resonance with the framing and language in which climate change is being discussed.</p>
Social barriers	<p>Individuals are embedded in social networks, form social identities, engage in social interactions, and adhere to varying degrees to social norms that suggest what counts as appropriate or inappropriate behavior. If engaging in civic action on climate change portrays a particular social identity, produces a social stigma, or reflects social norms in conflict with people's desired identity and accepted norms, they are unlikely to engage in this particular type of civic action. If civic engagement takes "too much" time or resources, and is inconvenient or too demanding given other daily concerns and competing obligations, even people sympathetic to the cause may not get involved. Finally, individuals—deeply embedded in society through socialization, institutions, and modern-day habitual activities—may not question or see alternatives to common emission-generating behaviors, and resist calls for alternative behaviors. As long as everyone else still drives their cars, why should they get out of theirs?</p>
Political barriers	<p>Individuals may be generally disinterested in political matters, prefer to leave political activism to others, and/or may feel deeply disenfranchised from the political process, and instead focus on matters of personal concern, impact, and influence. Some may hold a belief that government or industry or some other "other" will rise to the occasion and take care of the problem (a form of political transference). Others may not believe that existing institutions are failing in their responsibilities, thus why should they do anything that may be inconvenient? A related response is blaming others for the problem and/or projecting responsibility for remedial action onto those who will develop the necessary technological fix. Yet others, wedded to tradition and habit, may simply refuse to do anything different or new. Scientific uncertainty about the causes, urgency, or solutions of a problem can serve as a convenient rationale to hold on to the status quo.</p>
Other structural, economic, institutional, and technological barriers	<p>Even if the internal psycho-cognitive and external social and political barriers could be overcome, a person may still face structural barriers, such as lack of a convenient or economically-feasible alternative technology, existing laws and regulations, lack of public infrastructure, political institutions and electoral processes heavily controlled by vested interests, and so on. Information channels and communication infrastructure may also hinder engagement, even in this modern "information age." Generally heavy filters against the overabundance of information, declining newspaper readership, continued reliance on television as the main news source for Americans, and increased reliance on, and high selectivity among, internet news sources together limit depth of coverage and understanding of any issue. Moreover, the political economy of the media industry, with its ever-growing concentration of media ownership, and—arguably—consequent narrowing of the range of news and diversity of voices heard in mass communication channels does not offer individuals the breadth of views that may allow them to form a well informed opinion. More typically, people exist in rather homophilous socioeconomic-political-informational environments that are rather isolated from other, yet similarly homophilous, sections of society.</p>

Communication Strategies to Mobilize Civic Action on Climate Change

Civic engagement depends critically on effective communication. Communicators frame the issue of

concern; mobilize social or political actors and their opposition; and promote the solutions. They can sustain civic engagement through challenging times, help cross social divides, and assist in the deeper societal transformation ultimately needed to address this immense challenge.

For communication to play these roles effectively, i.e., to contribute to a desired social change such as engaging people in sustained civic action on [climate change](#), communicators have to meet two interrelated challenges: (1) elevate the motivation to get involved, and (2) lower the barriers/resistance to that engagement or that change in behavior. Mainstream communication efforts in the past, dominated as they were by physical scientists, environmental advocates, educators, and the media, typically emphasized the motivational side of this equation by giving people more information, scaring them, or appealing to their economic self-interest or moral self. Social scientists studying the impacts of these communication efforts, in turn, have focused on people's attitudes, understanding, level of concern, and (abstract) support for government policy. Scientific insights on what people actually do, how their action or inaction relates to their sense of civic responsibility, or how people overcome the barriers they face, is still rather scant to date. Below, I highlight promising elements of communication strategies for climate change and illustrate them with current examples from the U.S. context.

Audience Choice

Best practice in communication begins with consciously and strategically selecting an audience and understanding that audience's mental models and level of understanding of climate change, its interests, values, and concerns. This deeper understanding helps communicators make connections to issues already of concern to a given audience and frame climate change in a language that resonates. In recent time, for example, faith communities in the United States have engaged strongly on [global warming](#). They tend to connect with the moral dimension of climate change, i.e., via their persistent concern for social and intergenerational justice, and environmental stewardship (often summarized under the phrase "creation care"). Such a framing would not necessarily resonate with business leaders whose persistent concern is with the bottom line, investments and markets, competitiveness in the U.S. or [world economies](#), and so on. [Local and state governments](#), [students](#), or low-income communities would have yet different concerns, understandings, and values that effective communication must tap into. However subtle, different audiences need to be addressed in audience-specific ways that match frame, message content, and language with their specific information needs, pre-existing knowledge, and concerns.

Framing Climate Change

Naming and framing an issue is one of the most fundamental challenges for communicators, especially for an "invisible" global problem such as [climate change](#). According to Lakoff, frames are "mental structures that shape the way we see the world". Frames—expressed and suggested through language, images, gestures, and the messengers who use them—"shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as good or bad outcome of our actions". Audience-specific communication thus also means making global climate change "local" in more than the geographic sense. While people generally relate better to the things they can directly feel, experience, or see, making [global warming](#) "local" means connecting it with anything that is salient to them.

The task of framing—and re-framing as an issue evolves in public consciousness and political process—then is to identify those frame(s) that promise to be most powerful to a particular group of social actors. Frames are strategic tools of social movements and their counter-movements. The history of public debate of climate change in the United States (but more recently also in Europe and Australia), in which climate contrarians have deeply influenced the framing and discussion of the issue attests to the power of framing and the power of access to the media channel that would promote these frames.

In recent communication of [climate change](#) in the United States, an important transition has begun to occur where the issue has not just been framed as an "environmental" issue, but instead as a social, economic, technological, educational, security, and moral issue. For example, the Apollo Alliance, invoking the compelling national focus on putting the first man on the moon, envisions a future of clean energy, technological, economic, and moral leadership, and secure employment. Leaders in the [environmental justice](#) community who have taken up the climate issue tend to focus on fairness, health, safety, and well-being. Such alternative frames help individuals, organizations, and communities already active on other issues see how their work might be impacted by climate change. It also helps people not yet concerned

with global warming find common cause and ground. In short, not every conversation must begin or end with climate. Instead, we can open the door to climate change from a different side of the common house.

Messenger Choice

To reach audiences heretofore unengaged, it is also important to carefully select the messenger. In the United States, scientists, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), contrarians, and the media have dominated climate change communication in the past, resulting in a perception of global warming as a scientific, (still) highly uncertain, and controversial environmental issue. To alter that perception, change the groups of people involved, reach into sections of civic society yet-to-be engaged, and to cross social divides, the choice of messenger is a critical strategic decision. Effective communication matches the messenger both with the message and with the audience. In the first match, it is critical to understand messengers as part of the framing: Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director James Woolsey talking about the need to reduce oil consumption as a matter of national security (while also benefiting the climate) is an example of matching messenger with message content and frame. Messengers also need to be credible to the audience being addressed. The CEOs of companies involved in the Pew Center on Global Climate Change's Business Environmental Leadership Council are more persuasive spokespeople to other business leaders because they are like them and understand the pressures and issues CEOs have to deal with on a daily basis. Such "people like us" (or PLUs) are important for an audience's personal comfort, identity, and group-internal norms and cohesion. Often, PLUs (especially if we know and trust them personally) have greater credibility and legitimacy than someone who does not know an audience's circumstances as well.

Beyond Information and Emotional Appeals to Create Urgency

To overcome the psychological and cognitive barriers to engagement, communicators must be critically aware of the role of information and emotions in behavior change. While a minimum amount of information is necessary to understand that a problem exists, why it exists, what its implications are, and what one can do about it, information and understanding by itself typically do not suffice to motivate behavior change or civic engagement. In some instances, simply learning more about an issue can lead individuals to believe that they have actually "done something." Similarly, trying to get people to "care more" about an issue through appeals to fear or guilt can backfire and produce exactly the opposite results than intended (i.e., denial, numbing, and disengagement) unless a series of conditions are met that actually enable people to translate their concern and fear into appropriate actions that reduce the danger. A communication strategy that does not very quickly tell people that there are feasible solutions with which they can begin to address the problem, and what specific and appropriate actions individuals can take to help, is more likely to hinder than help the outreach and engagement effort. Moreover, because people feel manipulated and numbed by exposure to these messages, emotional appeals are frequently not enough any more to break through disinterest, apathy, and information filters. Surprise and novelty are needed instead.

Thus, rather than inundate audiences with more information or scary images of a dark future, it is critical now for communicators to constructively engage and support individuals and communities by creating a sense of feasibility, collectivity, and urgency arising from fact, experience, common sense, and a moral sense of responsibility. This would include elements such as the following:

- Global warming is not a future problem but a present challenge
- A concerted collective effort is needed to address it, and many people, communities and businesses are already involved
- Any delay now makes later solutions more difficult and expensive
- Those who have taken first steps have actually saved energy and money, and have improved quality of life and local economies (less traffic congestion, cleaner air, etc.)
- We already have models (and metaphors) for acting responsibly and reasonably in our long-term interest without sacrificing terribly in the present (saving for retirement or college, insurance, etc.)

Scientific Confidence, Practical Solutions, and Hope

Looking over the past 20 years of research, what is remarkable is not how much remains uncertain, but how strong the scientific consensus on climate change has grown. At the same time, there remains a (albeit lessening) public impression—fed by climate contrarians and common media practices—that there still is scientific controversy over the basic notion of human-caused climate change. Scientists themselves share in the responsibility for this situation, partly because they frequently emphasize the unknown more than the known, and partly because they have taken pains to respond to every misinformation and misleading statement by climate contrarians. There is good reason to do so—misinformation should not be left standing unchallenged and opportunities to educate the public should not be missed. But this pattern has left the pro-environmental and scientific side on the defensive. It is always more powerful to define the frame than respond to someone else's.

What is needed now from scientists and other communicators to strengthen public resolve is at least threefold. First, they must continue to convey the state of the science and how the confidence in scientific understanding has grown over time. Second, they must never overstate the scientific confidence with which aspects of climate change are known. But to retain credibility while conveying confidence, communicators should lead with what is most certain, and discuss remaining uncertainties in light of what is well understood. Typically, people respond constructively to uncertainty (because they live with uncertainty all the time!) when they have some bearings that help them navigate unknown territory. In fact, it is an unsubstantiated claim that we need to know everything for sure before we can act (decisions to go to war, to invest in the stock market or to act on medical diagnoses come to mind). Finally, communicators should provide context for the evolving scientific understanding of climate change, i.e., that it is the nature of science to always push back the frontiers of the unknown, and in the process, stumble upon findings that require revisions of what was previously thought to be known.

Perhaps more important than continuing to defend the science of climate change is moving toward communicating solutions. Polls suggest that most Americans now are convinced that climate change is real, even if this belief is not very solid or anchored in deep understanding of the issue. Once people are engaged and realize the challenge that climate change presents, they instinctively want practical solutions. Those inclined to engage in civic action may be particularly predisposed to wanting to take or support actions. The polls also suggest that Americans do not know what solutions are feasible, important, or available, and that they cannot see their own role in tackling the problem. Thus, what is needed more now is information about practical solutions, help, support from others, encouragement, and empowerment. What is needed now is a sense of hope. Tapping into people's desires for a better future, their social identities and aspirations, and cultural values that promote individual and collective action and engagement for the greater good (e.g., ingenuity, responsibility, stewardship, being a good team player, and leadership) can all increase people's motivation besides the more instrumental reasons (such as personal economic gain, competitiveness, legal compliance, and so on).

To help individuals stay engaged on an easily overwhelming issue, sort through complex issues, understand difficult trade-offs, and change habitual thoughts and behaviors, communicators must identify and engage sources of social support. Typically, interpersonal and small-group dialogue can address these needs much better than mass communication received in the privacy of one's living room. Neighborhood-based eco-teams, green-living projects on campuses, science cafés, church-based discussion groups and many other examples exist already in the United States and Canada that illustrate these insights. In such small settings, the power of social norms, accountability, identity, and personal ties is brought to bear on the barriers and resistance to change. They also allow individuals to be acknowledged and appreciated for their efforts, to serve as role models, and to provide very immediate positive feedback on one's actions.

A Compelling Positive Vision

Finally, most of what people hear about climate change in the news media, from scientists and environmental advocates involves projections of frightening futures, possible doom for treasured environments and species, and mental images of disaster and havoc. It is a very difficult scenario to face, and consequently, many don't. Moreover, citizens alive today are unlikely to see greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere return to pre-industrial levels, or even 2005 levels, even with a concerted global mitigation effort. We and the next generation may well become witness to a deteriorated climate for many regions of the world.

While this seems easily discouraging, communicators would be remiss in creating a sense of false hope by suggesting otherwise. The time lags built into our social and climate systems requires that communicators think hard about what “success” would look like, and how to sustain civic engagement when positive feedback is not immediately to be had from an unforgiving atmosphere. Defining a positive vision of a worthwhile future must become a key focus of communication, outreach, and civic engagement efforts in coming years, including defining measures of progress. Communicators must convey these indicators of forward achievement just as much—and maybe even more—than what is wrong or not yet happening. While it is unrealistic to expect that citizens will stay focused on climate (or any other) through the ups and downs of issue attention cycles, a vision of a compelling positive future will be essential as a compass through challenging times.

Conclusion

In the absence of committed federal leadership in the United States, a burgeoning level of activity at lower levels of government and in civil society has characterized America’s response to climate change in the past two years. Local and state governments, pioneering businesses, religious communities, students on dozens of campuses across the country, traditional environmental and social advocacy groups, and a range of newly created groups have emerged as “grassroots leaders” on climate change. Even if and when they succeed in building sufficient political pressure on federal leaders to force nationwide policy changes, their role in societal response to climate change is not complete.

What the already-existing civic engagement illustrates is that countless leverage points exist to initiate social change (from the bottom-up, top-down, and across sectors). Smaller changes plow the ground for bigger ones while spreading an important symbolic message to those who are not yet engaged. It is the typical pattern of pioneers and early adopters to create the conditions for a majority of actors eventually to adopt some innovative practice or technology. Given the long-term nature of climate change, civic engagement as a reflection of a community’s or society’s social capital will be essential in dealing with the impacts of climate change and addressing not just mitigation but also adaptation needs. Moreover, civil society (including parents, religious leaders, and educators) plays a critical role in fostering the deeper social changes (e.g., in values, social norms, and practices) that will support the implementation of bigger structural changes required as global warming progresses.

In this article, I have tried to illustrate how effective communication can play a critical role in mobilizing people for civic engagement. The tasks of attaining deeper understanding of climate change, persuading people of its urgency, constructively and respectfully debating the value choices that underlie societal responses, envisioning a positive future, and supporting individuals and groups in actually changing behavior and policies, point to an important shift needed in future communication efforts. Rather than just continuing with and finessing our mass communication in “wholesale” fashion, there are important reasons for—if not replacing—at least complementing such efforts with audience-specific, small-group, dialogic, “retail” approaches to talking about climate change. It is this type of much-needed face-to-face communication that stirs the hope that communication could play an essential role in forming trustful social bonds, building and maintaining social capital, facilitating civic engagement on climate change, and ultimately rejuvenating the democratic political process in the United States.

Notes

1. This article draws on and extends a discussion of the role of communication in building a social movement for climate protection in a forthcoming book chapter (Moser, forthcoming a). It also builds on the insights generated in a multi-collaborator, three-year project led by myself and Lisa Dilling (University of Colorado, Boulder), summarized in a forthcoming anthology from Cambridge University Press (Moser and Dilling, forthcoming); for further information. The author would like to thank the organizers and participants of the Climate Politics in North America conference for helpful discussion and feedback on a previous draft of this paper.
2. Expressing concern over climate change and general support for political action by government or industry in opinion polls, while indicative and encouraging, is a long way from actively engaging in civic action. Examples of such recent polls can be found in ABC News/TIME/Stanford University (2006), PIPA (2005), and Brewer (2005).
3. See, e.g., The Interfaith Climate Change Network, Web of Creation, or the Eco-Justice Programs of

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The Authors

The Woodrow Wilson Center established the Canada Institute to explore one of America's most important bilateral relationships, but one that gets far less attention in Washington than it deserves. For most Americans, Canada is—in the words of former U.S. Ambassador James Blanchard—“the invisible world next door.” To remedy this imbalance, the Canada Institute seeks to promote policy debate and analysis of key issues of bilateral concern between Canada and the United States; highlight the imp ... (Full Bio)



Susi is an action researcher whose work focuses on the societal impacts of, and responses to, climate change, particularly in coastal areas, and on how to



communicate global warming in a way that facilitates the necessary social changes. She just published an anthology on the topic, entitled *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). A geographer by training (Ph.D. from Clark University, 1997), her ... (Full Bio)

