

Better Understanding and Improving Climate Communications | The Yale Forum on Climate Change & The Media

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Goal of U. of Michigan Erb Institute/UCS Workshop

Some 100 social scientists, communications experts, and climate scientists convene at University of Michigan's Erb Institute/Union of Concerned Scientists session to better understand, improve climate communication dialogue.



The University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, site of a weekend meeting of some 100 climate communications experts.

ANN ARBOR, MI. — Here's the formula:

Convene nearly 100 of the nation's foremost climate change social scientists and communicators (you can call them "practitioners" here) ...

Throw in two group dinners in a storied, albeit wintry, academic environment ...

Open with a top-name documentary film producer highlighting footage from one of the nation's most respected climate scientists ... who also happens to be one of the field's leading science communicators. (Hint, hint: [Richard Alley](#) and [Earth: The Operator's Manual](#).)

Include a Friday evening public y'all-come "Town Hall" meeting.

And, and this is important ...

Flat-out prohibit the use of Powerpoints once the opening plenary talk is finished, and limit subsequent formal presentations to only five or seven minutes each, keeping the ball rolling and the invited participants actively engaged.

There you have it. And what exactly you do have is the January 19-21 University of Michigan Erb Institute/Union of Concerned Scientists seminar on "Increasing Public Understanding of Climate Risks and Choices: What We Can Learn from Social Science Research and Practice."

Social Sciences: MIA (Missing in Action) from Climate Dialogue

For climate science/social science/communications wonks from across the country, it was a smorgasbord of provocative presentations and group interactions, topped off by commitments to build on the lessons learned and shared. Organized by Erb Institute Director Andrew Hoffman of the University of Michigan and UCS Climate Campaign Chief Scientist Peter C. Frumhoff, the meeting was built around the shared concern that ...

The public dialog concerning human-induced global warming/climate change has been dominated by the physical sciences in defining the problem and by economics in determining suitable policy responses. Missing from the equation are important contributions to be made by the social and psychological sciences, in part because the latter have been inadequately 'incentivized' to join the discourse.

The full-day Friday session opened with a presentation seeking to explain, at least in part, reasons for declines in public concern over climate change in the face of mounting scientific evidence. Among key factors identified: the sagging economy coupled with high unemployment; drop-offs in media coverage; unusual cold weather spells ("snowpocalypse" and "snowmageddon") leading to public confusion; efforts by an effective "denial industry"; and public perceptions of controversies surrounding the hacked e-mail and mistaken melting Himalayan glaciers experiences.

A Host of Key Insights on Communications

Among key messages shared by expert presenters throughout the session, and seemingly accepted in large part by many of those in attendance:

- Climate change "engagement" strategies and messages need to be specifically targeted to different audiences, including those across a spectrum of acceptance or denial of established climate science evidence;
- As important as the message to be delivered is the specific messenger delivering that message: An ideal message or speaker for one audience may fall flat before other audiences, notwithstanding possible similarities in the message being delivered;
- Providing climate science "knowledge" to specific audiences is necessary, but ultimately insufficient if that audience's emotions, values, ideology, and overall belief systems are not accounted for and addressed. In addressing an audience, speak directly to their aspirations and values, one participant advised, and avoid confounding facts and values. "You'll otherwise lose the battle for attention ... The 'should' claims provide an excuse for the audience to run away." Basing your views primarily on the much-ballyhooed "knowledge deficit," "science illiteracy," "knowledge gap" assumptions leads only to a fool's errand.
- Three critical steps in devising a climate communications strategy: A clear sense of "present realities"; a clear sense of where we want to go; and a roadmap to get there.
- Avoid an attitude of "We're right. They're wrong. How can we change them?"
- Try to avoid the audience's conflating a policy response, for instance "cap-and-trade," with the foundational scientific evidence. They can understand and support the latter while objecting to the former. "Embed sustainability into the DNA of civilization itself," one expert suggested, so citizens "would almost have to make a conscious decision NOT to be sustainable." Adopt an attitude of "amnesty," another suggested, for those who, for instance, have put people at high risks by building in flood plains and vulnerable areas.
- People conform to information processing consistent with their cultures, one expert social scientist said. "Your processing is motivated to affirm the dominant view of your group; you search for affirming information, and you best remember affirming information." Another: "Open communications by reaffirming the listener's worth ... come as a friend, a friendly communicator. Find connections, and tap into cultural values that speak to that audience ... People will defend their sense of self before they will change their behavior." In a hero-oriented society, make it heroic "to act to protect the environment," and give people "a reason to become heroes in a climate protection culture." Another suggestion: "Start with where they

[the audience] are, not with where you are.”

- Consider focusing on climate change risks to motivate particular audiences to take concrete actions. The insurance example — home owners annually buy fire insurance not because we think our home will burn down, but rather because we don't know that it won't — is one example of effective risk story-telling.
- In the case of those who might be considered to be “conspiracy theorists” (for instance, suspicious of an agenda they see as seeking to deprive rights and freedoms) providing more information may well be counterproductive: the more information provided a conspiracy theorist ... the bigger the conspiracy they perceive.
- The public at large cannot be expected to “study” and absorb or substantially understand climate science. Instead, they will “take their cues” from the political leaders and activists or spokespersons they most admire, whether it be an Al Gore or Bill McKibben or a Rush Limbaugh.
- Public understanding and acceptance that there is a strong consensus on climate science across the scientific community is crucial, but for now too large a segment of the public is unaware that such a consensus indeed exists.
- Constructive policy action on an issue like climate change can be driven by a majority of public opinion, and consensus does not mean “unanimity.” The “let me persuade you” model is flawed in addressing the general public. Better to think of the model of a jury trial: “We don't have to convince the opposing lawyer, but rather the jury,” one speaker emphasized.
- The public is unrealistic in thinking the scientific community can substantially reduce or eliminate legitimate uncertainty, but uncertainty (which cuts both ways) is not an excuse for inaction in the face of overwhelming evidence.
- Repetition of key points by respected messengers is crucial. For instance: Climate change is real; it's the result of human activities this time; the scientific community agrees; and there are things that can be done to mitigate its worst impacts.
- In addressing faith communities, several speakers said that notwithstanding strong scientific evidence, an effective message can be that “You should care because God cares.” “God cares for those suffering from desertification,” a speaker emphasized. “Think about it theologically God will hold us accountable.” Another speaker: “Love God and love your neighbors as yourself,” and if we love our neighbors — defined to include future generations — we do not pollute or foul their space.
- A positive attitude, and the very word “solutions” can be invaluable. “Industry loves focusing on ‘solutions,’” an industry representative advised. Another approach discussed as being helpful in capturing corporate interests: engage them on notions of emerging technologies and long-term business and employment opportunities.
- A question raised: Should there be a climate social sciences “extension service” analogous to the agricultural extension service?
- Consider the notion not of “global warming” but rather of “local warming.” How would your community look in a four-degrees warmer climate? What impacts on water supply, on local farming? What would be involved in adapting to it? How would it be financed? What winners, what losers? Etc.
- Just as climate scientists are not “monolithic,” neither are social scientists. Each field has its own prestigious journals, its own institutional pressures (e.g., tenure pressures), its own culture.

A Conservative's 'Conservative Solution' on Climate, Energy

Along with one-and-a-half days of intense information-sharing among the invitees, the Erb Institute/UCS program included a Friday evening “town hall” open to the public. University security officials, cognizant of the fracas sometimes accompanying discussions of climate change, insisted on having uniformed campus security personnel in the crowded business school theater for the event. That proved unnecessary. View the town hall session as it was [live-streamed](#).



*Former S.C. Rep.
Bob Inglis*

Among the workshop participants addressing that town hall session, former South Carolina Republican Congressman Bob Inglis, who describes himself as staunchly politically conservative, explained how two visits to Antarctica had prompted him to abandon his climate science skepticism and accept the consensus science.

“Who here is a conservative, raise your hand,” Inglis teased in his opening remarks. “Anyone know a conservative? Anyone seen one in a zoo?”

Inglis, defeated in 2010 in the Republican primary, pointed to connections between science and religion and said he advocates a “conservative solution” to energy and climate issues.

“End all subsidies for all fuels,” Inglis said. “Attach all costs to all fuels. Make them accountable for all of their costs. Fix the market distortion, internalize the negative externalities. Make it so the market place can properly judge petroleum vis-à-vis other competing transportation fuels; coal-fired electricity vs. other ways of making electricity.”

Inglis, in Q&A with an audience member, acknowledged that zeroing-out all subsidies would initially hurt solar and some other energy supplies, but he said that by reflecting “all” costs of fossil fuels, that distortion would in time be eliminated. The suggestion prompted some concerns about how “all costs” would be defined — would it include military costs involved, for instance, with keeping the Straits of Hormuz open to oil shipments?

Program sponsors pledged toward the end of the Saturday, January 21, session to develop ways to continue the dialogue and foster collaborations among and beyond those invited to participate in the workshop.

UCS’s Frumhoff acknowledged that the climate change challenges amount to “a marathon and not a sprint” and said that in the end, “none of us knows exactly how it’s all going to work” in terms of best informing the public and encouraging sustainability in the long run.

A [broadcast report](#) by Rebecca Williams of Michigan Public Radio’s “The Environment Report” highlights some aspects of the meeting.

Bud Ward

Bud Ward is editor of The Yale Forum (E-mail: bud@yaleclimatemediainforum.org).