

## Interview



**Anna Fahey**

Communications Strategist  
Sightline Institute

*October 13, 2011*

**Q: Does the Occupy movement feel any different from the climate movement?**

A: It does feel different because it's so organic. They call it leaderless, which I suppose it is. That's sort of the beauty of it is that it doesn't have a centralized organizing entity, it's not funded by anybody, it's not attached to any particular identity or issue or campaign. Of course as a communications specialist, I think 'oh my god they need to have a message,' but in a way that's the beauty of it too. It's not just one message, it's all these different kinds of people from amazingly diverse backgrounds, circumstances and interests tied together by a common thread that is very immediate and visceral in the here and now. The brand crisis with climate change is that it's an abstract problem with complex solutions and getting people to feel that kind of outrage or even interest or motivation to engage with the issue is an uphill slog in some ways.

**Q: From what you've seen in the Pacific Northwest, has climate appeared much in the list of issues Occupy folks are concerned about?**

A: It's definitely not central. Out of 100 or 200 handmade signs, 5 or 10 will be about climate or environmental issues. I think the understanding is that we're not going to make progress on any of the issues that we can care about if there's a corporate stranglehold on the system. Somebody who has been out of work for two years is going to be focused more on jobs and the economy. For those of us who have luxury of having a job, we're not going to make progress on any of the things that matter without making some fundamental changes in how the system works.

**Q: Are there some takeaways that the folks working on climate can draw from what's been going on at Occupy?**

A: The lessons are not necessarily new, it's sort of that brand crisis I was talking about. We know that we need to make it more about the here and now and more about our own families and our own communities in a way that's real to people. Knowing that that's the problem is different than knowing how to do it.

My obsession lately has been the so-called low-hanging fruit as far as climate engagement goes, or what looks like it should be low-hanging fruit but has been consistently just out of our reach: the individual or family in Seattle, for example, with progressive values, they consider themselves green in consumer choices and a lot of behavioral choices, but they remain utterly mystified about how to engage in the issue of climate change. So what looks like it should be an easy audience segment to engage is actually really difficult because we don't have a clear ask always—I've spent the past five years working on how you talk about cap and trade, and there's never a clear ask except for yet another call to reach out to your senator, which I think people are feeling hasn't worked or has been ineffectual or feels unsatisfactory on a lot of levels.

**Q: Do you think Occupy will be able to sustain a “leaderless” movement?**

A: I hope they can sustain a movement, but I'm not sure they can sustain the current occupation—we're rolling into winter. They've sparked something that's bigger than just a physical presence in public space. They've sparked a conversation that needed to be had and they have gotten a lot of attention.

**Q: In addition to the lessons, what do you think the ramifications are for the climate movement? What do you think should happen in terms of climate having a bigger presence in the Occupy movement?**

A: We should be stressing consistently and persistently that climate change and energy reform is an economic issue, a health issue, the way we're going to stabilize local economies, create jobs, unhitch families and local businesses from the fossil fuel rollercoaster. We shouldn't try to co-opt the Occupy movement in any way, but I think we should use the infrastructure we've built around climate to support what is a really powerful thing happening: a diverse coalition of organizations and people, which is what the climate movement needed, to open the doors and make a bigger tent.

**Q: It seems an incredible opportunity for climate movement.**

A: It's a two-pronged thing. It will be difficult to make progress on a lot of different issues, including climate and energy, if we don't have the systems mechanisms sorted out. That's one piece. The other piece is the economic co-benefits argument for cutting emissions and shifting to clean energy sources. We've done a good job talking about it, but here's a new receptive, active audience and set of partners who aren't the usual suspects.

**Q: Have you been surprised by how much media coverage the Occupy movement has gotten thus far?**

A: No. It's maybe surprising that it didn't get any coverage at the beginning. It's been interesting to see how much guerrilla coverage there is and how powerful that is. It's a way this kind of movement can really bypass the corporate mainstream media and that's exciting.

**Q: Do you have any sense of how Occupy has been able to get this whole thing rolling?**

A: I'm kind of mystified by that, frankly. It does seem that the stars aligned for this, where enough people had just had enough—there's enough people out of work, enough people energized by opposition to some of the other things that are happening in the country such as the Tea Party movement. And then there are all these social networks and ways of getting word out about things that are not necessarily new but being used by more people.

And there's this whole generation of kids in college now who got really excited about Obama in 2008 and then maybe felt a bit hung out to dry or that the energy was diffused by gridlock and negativity in Washington, DC, and they got turned off. So having the opportunity to jump back into that on an effort that didn't have anything to do with an electoral campaign or one particular issue was another part of that equation, where they probably wouldn't have done it again for Obama.

**Q: Perhaps the specter of Rick Perry and others has something to do with it as well?**

A: I saw a Stanford poll last month after one of the Republican primary debates where the candidates were talking in terms full-on science denial when issue of climate change came up. One analyst who worked on this poll was pretty convinced that a significant spike in American public concern about climate change in that poll that happened right after that debate was a direct effect of that surprising rejection of science. If that's one thing that comes out of the Tea Party, we'll take it, if it's an increased awareness of just how strange that anti-science position is and how un-American that is.

**Q: Is there anything else that climate organizers should be looking to Occupy for in terms of way to do things differently?**

A: What this movement does is really let people be who they are and embraces a range of identities for whatever reasons they are there. It's an open-arms, big-tent movement. We alienate people when we invite them by saying you have to be an environmentalist or have climate change as your central concern. It's not wrong to wish that people would feel those things, but even the greenest Americans don't necessarily self-identify as environmentalists. Learning how to welcome people in and make a compelling new collective identity outside of those constraining defunct old identities seems to be the way forward. That doesn't mean to not talk about climate, it means not having to be that stereotype and building bridges across issues.