Between Truth and Meaning: Cultural Contexts of Climate Change Communication

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My Talk in Four Stages

1. Science alone – communicating ‘the facts’ -- is never enough

2. All communication – including climate change - is always framed, and hence political

3. ‘Climate change’ carries a surfeit of meanings

4. Why communicating weather forecasts is not the same as communicating climate change
Outcome Measures of Communication

- Increased attention
- Improved knowledge
- Aroused feelings
- Changed attitudes
- Intentions for the future
- Behavioural change
- Political activism
A Normative Agenda

If the challenge is social transformation, then:

- What role does the idea of climate change have?
- What role does climate science play in climate change?
- What is the role of communication?
(Climate) Science is Never Enough

2014 Annual Meeting

... called for “decisive political action” on climate change on the basis of “what we know”

“All we need is the will to change, which we trust will be motivated by ... an understanding of the science of climate change”

[R K Pachauri, 2 November 2014]
‘Soft’ Facts and ‘Hard’ Values

For post-normal science, Funtowicz and Ravetz describe how the "traditional distinction between ‘hard’, objective scientific facts and ‘soft’, subjective value-judgements is now inverted.”

That is to say, facts become soft, and values hard.

“... our expectations for Enlightenment ideals of applied rationality are themselves irrational. We are asking science to do the impossible: to arrive at scientifically coherent and politically unifying understandings of problems that are inherently open, indeterminate and contested”

‘Stop treating science denial like a disease’: Dan Sarewitz, 21 Aug 2017
The Deficit Model is Dead

“Although appealing in their simplicity, the nature of communication is much more complex than these transmission perspectives convey” [Ballantyne, 2016]

“... scholars have highlighted that individual factors other than knowledge can have a significant influence on attitudes toward science. The committee has chosen to highlight a select number of these factors: media use, value predispositions, and trust.”

National Academy of Sciences, 2016 ‘Science Literacy, Concepts and Consequences’
Consensus Messaging as a Limited Communication Strategy

• triggers identity-protection
• is blind to cultural context
• a potential obstacle to engagement

“All the "social marketing" of "scientific consensus" does is augment the toxic idioms of contempt that are poisoning our science communication environment. The unmistakable social meaning of the material featuring this message ... is that "you and people who share your identity are morons". [Dan Kahan, February 2016]
Climate Change Communication is Always Framed

Scientific ‘truth’ can never be communicated entirely or purely – communication requires language, metaphors, visuals, etc. – and these are immediately selective with regard to ‘the facts’.

Climate change communications are framed through webs of association, identity and meaning, which variously engage, provoke, meet resistance, galvanise activism.

In this sense, climate change communication is always a political act.
2 ‘Centre-Right’ Frames

Starting a New Conversation on Climate Change with the European Centre-Right

Angela Merkel’s Speech to the United States Congress, 3 November 2009

Chancellor Merkel’s aim, in her 2009 speech to the US Congress, was to encourage strong US action in the coming Copenhagen climate conference. This required appealing to the values of Republicans. Throughout her speech she validates their identity. She talks about America as “a land of unlimited opportunity.” She says that, as a child, she “was passionate about the vast American landscape which seemed to breathe the very spirit of freedom and independence” - as noted above, conservatives’ attitudes to environment often focus on landscape.

‘Balance’
‘Stability’
‘Leadership’
‘Duty and Responsibility’
‘Freedom’

‘Save the planet’
‘Equality’
‘Social justice’
‘Ecology’
‘Constraints’

Climate Narratives from the Pacific

‘Climate refugees’ or ‘Pacific warriors’? – global technocentric or local power narrative? Who speaks for climate?

“Contestation between narrative-networks in the Pacific Islands is evident in the struggles over the authority to “know” the Pacific …”

“… by writing Pacific Islanders into the position of hero within the narrative, decision-making and governance is opened up to include multiple voices and knowledges”

Metaphors and Climate Engineering

Planet is a machine – ‘fixing’, ‘repairing’, ‘hacking’, ‘manipulating thermostat’

Planet is a body – ‘sunshade’, ‘sun-cream’

Planet is a patient/addict – ‘treatment’, ‘fever’, ‘curing addiction’

‘Plan B’ – insurance policy

The Independent newspaper
January 2009

2 Climate Visuals

- Show ‘real people’ not staged photo-ops
- Tell new stories
- Show climate causes at scale
- Climate impacts are emotionally powerful
- Show local (but serious) climate impacts
- Be very careful with protest imagery
- Understand your audience

7 key principles for climate change communication
http://www.climatevisuals.org/
“... the phrase ‘climate-change’ mobilises very different sets of ideologies, meanings, values and goals ... it means different things to different people in different contexts, places and networks”
Climate change might usefully be seen as a synecdoche (or metonymy) – a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (e.g. ‘society’ for ‘high society’)

What things does climate change stand-in for?
“Risk society means that the past is losing its power of determination of the present. It is being replaced by the future -- that is to say, something non-existent, fictitious and constructed -- as the basis for present-day action ...

... Expected risks are the whip to keep the present in line. The more threatening the shadows that fall on the present because a terrible future is impending, the more believed are the headlines provoked by the dramatisation of risk today”

Ulrich Beck, 1997
Climate Shange as Loss of ‘Nature’

“Not long ago we knew the best time for planting seeds ... when the leaves would turn deep orange, when to look forward to building snowmen. Things like the cuckoo’s dependable call would be a sign that spring had come. There was a kind of certainty to our lives ...

But the cuckoo’s are disappearing and it seems all the patterns of the world are being scrambled ... For the first time in human history the ability of our planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted”

Camp for Climate Action newspaper, 2008, ‘You are here’
“Those of us fighting for change should ensure that we mount a political battle against the climate sceptics, not simply a scientific one ... the real enemy is the capitalist system, which puts profit before the lives of billions of humans and the planet ...

... the real allies in this fight [are] the millions of working people around the world who have no vested interest in a system that prioritises profit over the world’s climate.”

Suzanne Jeffrey, 4 January 2011 International Socialism
• “the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity”

• This “require[s] that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms”

• “such a spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world”
Communicating Weather Forecasts

Weather forecasts and climate change predictions both rely on similar science (i.e., epistemology) and both have to deal with communicating scientific uncertainties, but:

- weather is about the immediate future (a few days)
- weather forecasts are interpreted through direct experience of places and everyday practices
- weather forecasts are ‘undemanding’ of our imaginations
Communicating Climate Change

- climate change is about the (deep) past, present and future
- it opens up a non-intuitive world of hyper-connected cause and effect
- which prompts narratives of culpability and blame (explicit or implicit)

Finding the meaning of climate change demands a different kind of story than does tomorrow’s weather (although it encompasses the weather)
4 What Sort of a Story is Climate Change?

Comedy
Drama
Epic
Satire
Tragedy
Tragi-comedy

Neo-liberalism
Smart-growth reformism
Eco-modernism
Anti-capitalist radicalism
Deep green eco-radicalism

Fatalism

Hierarchy

Individualism

Egalitarianism
“The emphasis on [climate] science, consumption, economics and policy usually fails to engage people at any deep level because it does not address the narrative, the mythological, the metaphorical … The faiths are the holders of these areas and without them, policies will have very few real roots …”  
[ARC, 2007]
Thank You!

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