



Framing in Climate Communication – How to Convince Your Audience

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ESMH Summer School

Journalism and climate change: how to tell complex stories?

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Psy4F – About us

- “We are psychologists and psychotherapists who contribute their psychological and therapeutic expertise to meet the challenges posed by the climate crisis and to facilitate a sustainable future.
- This includes creating awareness of the climate crisis, facilitating emotional coping strategies and constructive action when dealing with the climate crisis, and supporting climate activists (individuals and groups).”

<https://www.psychologistsforfuture.org>



Climate messages in the media

- “Experts warn of climate mayhem... more frequent and intense heatwaves, bushfires, drought, and landslides.”

→ Disasters

- “John Kerry called climate change a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ – the ‘world’s most fearsome.’”

→ Destruction

- “There is a great amount of uncertainty about climate science. These uncertainties undermine our ability to determine how CO₂ has affected the climate in the past.”

→ Uncertainty

- “Policymakers [move] toward costly regulations and policies that will harm hardworking... families and do little to decrease global carbon emissions. And the question then is what do we do about it and how much it will cost the consumer?”

→ Costs

- “People ‘must be willing to make sacrifices to cut climate change.’”

→ Loss and sacrifice

≡ How do we behave?





Home > Fakten besser vermitteln > Neues zum Thema

Klimakommunikation

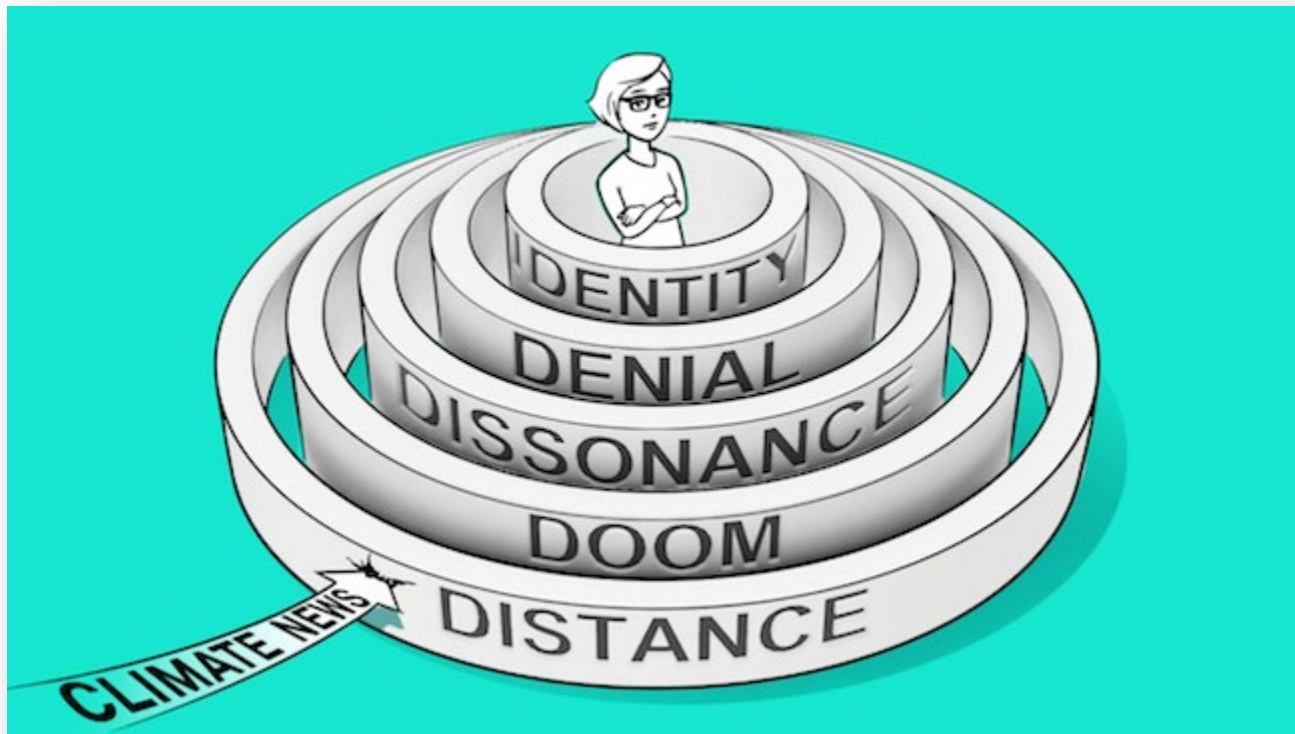
Is it still possible to stay below 1.5 degrees? In principle yes, but the social pressure is missing.

07.07.2021

Ist es noch möglich, unter 1,5 Grad zu bleiben? Im Prinzip ja, aber der gesellschaftliche Druck reicht nicht

Ein Hamburger Forschungsteam kommt nach einer aufwändigen Analyse zu dem Schluss: Es ist zurzeit „nicht realistisch zu erwarten“, dass die Erderhitzung unter 1,5 Grad bleibt. Das Problem sind aber nicht Technik und Innovation – sondern die Gesellschaft erzeugt nicht genug Druck. Viele Treiber weisen zwar in die richtige Richtung, zum Beispiel die Erfolge bei Klimaklagen. Doch der Schwung reicht noch nicht

“Five barriers that stop us from dealing with what the world needs” (Stoknes, 2015)



I. Distance

- When we hear about the climate, we hear about something
 - far away in space → think Arctic ice, polar bears
 - far away in time → think 2100
 - huge and slow-moving → think gigatons and centuries.
- So it's not here. It's not now.
- Since it feels so far away from me, it seems outside my circle of influence, so I feel helpless about it. There's nothing I can do.

II. Doom

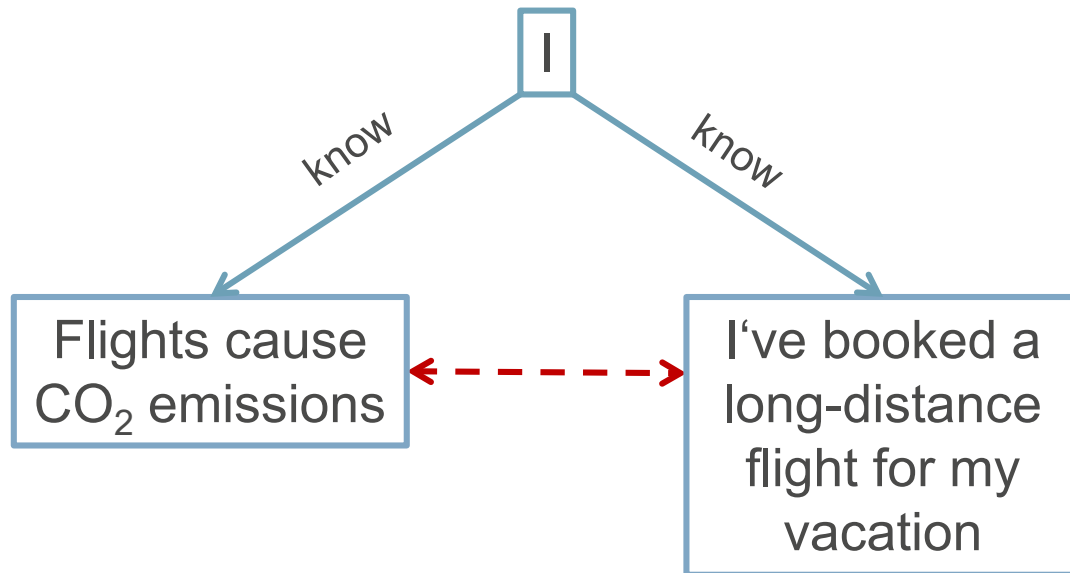
- Climate change is usually framed as a looming disaster, bringing losses, cost and sacrifice. That makes us fearful. But after the first fear is gone, your brain soon wants to avoid this topic altogether.
- After 30 years of scary climate change communications, more than 80 percent of media articles still use disaster framings.
- With a lack of practical solutions, helplessness grows and the fear message backfires.

III. Dissonance

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- This is felt as an inner discomfort. To get rid of this discomfort, we start coming up with justifications:
 - “My neighbour flies much more than I do.”
 - “Not flying doesn’t amount to anything if I am the only one to do it.”
 - “You know, climate is always changing.”

IV. Denial

- If we ignore or ridicule facts about climate disruptions, we might find inner refuge from fear and guilt.
- Denial doesn't come from lack of intelligence or knowledge.
- It's a state of mind in which I may be aware of some troubling knowledge, but I live and act as if I don't know.
- Often this is reinforced by others, my family or community, agreeing not to raise this tricky topic.

V. iDentity

- We filter news through our professional and self-identity.
- We look for information that confirms our existing values and notions, and filter away what challenges them.
- Self-identity overrides the facts. If new information requires us to change ourselves, the information is likely to lose. We experience resistance to calls for change in self-identity.

Crafting climate messages that work requires navigating around these five defences

- The anti-climate movement has been successful in triggering each of these barriers in its battle against climate science.
- Inadvertently, climate communicators have activated them, too, for instance by
 - conveying climate facts through abstract graphs and long time lines,
 - using framing that backfires,
 - not linking risks to opportunities for action,
 - relying on bad storytelling.
- People have to want to live in a climate friendly society because they see it as better, not because they get scared or instructed into it.

New frames that are more conducive to action

We can begin to talk about climate in terms of:

1. Insurance & security
2. Health
3. Preparedness & ethics
4. Opportunity, not sacrifice

Framing: 1. From cost to insurance and security

Framing: From cost to insurance and security

- People are generally loss-averse: They hate rising costs, losing money, jobs, or other resources about twice as much as they enjoy gaining the equivalent.
- Many environmentalists and economists have either used the loss frame or cost frame to talk about actions against climate change.
- It's more effective to reframe climate in terms of risk and insurance: How do we insure ourselves today against further climate disruptions tomorrow?
- *Argument:* Modern countries do not keep a military defense because it is profitable or has a low cost but from the logic that wars could happen again.

Framing: From cost to insurance and security (cont'd)

Potential framing:

- We must build a climate defense today so we can avoid the climate declaring war on us in the future.
- Future climate mayhem may release waves of unrest, riots, refugees, and terrorists.
- Good climate policy is good military strategy – something the US Department of Defense has emphasized in its own reports.



Framing: From cost to insurance and security (cont'd)

- Around the world we pay taxes to maintain armies to protect the values we believe in at the level of 2 to 3 percent of global GDP.
- The same could be the case for climate action.
- Even if the probability of large, irreversible consequences is low, it makes perfect sense to pay a little insurance today to avoid huge future disruption.

Framing: 2. From destruction to health

Framing: From destruction to health

- Pictures of waves breaking through harbors or buildings have become all too familiar.
- Universal framings such as *global climate*, *the planet*, and *the environment* strengthen the distance to the topic.
- What makes lives worth living is more about people, family, hometown, friends, and children – and their health in particular.

Framing: From destruction to health (cont'd)

- Six categories of identified climate-related health impacts:
 - heat-related sickness,
 - respiratory health problems,
 - infectious disease,
 - waterborne disease,
 - food insecurity,
 - mental health problems.
- With climate change, there will be more itching, sneezing, and gasping for breath, expanding the ranges of poison ivy, mosquitos, and other stinging insects and pollen-producing plants.

Framing: From destruction to health – Example of a climate message that made people feel hopeful

“Redesigning our cities and towns to make it easier and safer to travel by foot, bicycle and public transportation will reduce the number of cars on the road, reduce carbon dioxide emissions, reduce traffic injuries and fatalities, and help people become more physically active, lose weight, strengthen their bones, and probably even to remain mentally sharp as they age.”



Framing: 3. From uncertainty to preparedness and ethics

Framing: From uncertainty to preparedness and ethics

- For scientists it's easy to fall into the uncertainty frame, since climate change is about long-term impacts on rainfall, glaciers, storms, etc..
- What the public hears is that “They don't know”.
- Denialists have grabbed this opportunity and used it as a weapon against statements that climate change is human-based, and that it will get more destructive in the future.
- Rather than arguing about uncertainty, it is more effective to talk about preparedness and ethics.

Framing: From uncertainty to preparedness and ethics (cont'd)

- Preparedness has to do with how to get ready for upcoming change, strengthening our resilience and feeling of safety.
- “Yes, extreme shifts may be unpredictable but they are far from unthinkable. Therefore we are better safe than sorry. We also bring a raincoat to the mountain trip despite the fact that the sun is shining.”
- When we start preparing for it, climate change becomes more real, near, and urgent, and willingness to mitigate can go up, too.
- A focus group study found that 85 percent of voters in the US seek preparedness as the preferred approach to address climate disruption, whereas adaptation is seen as a passive and reactive strategy.

Framing: From uncertainty to preparedness and ethics (cont'd)

- Some argue: “Since other countries, like China and India, are bigger emitters and won’t curb their emissions, increasing our own cost to decrease our emissions is a completely wasted effort.”
 - But climate disruption policy is about values and ethics, not the other countries’ future actions.
 - How far shall we let economic resource consumption grow at the expense of marginalized people and ecologies? How should long-term considerations or future generations weigh up against short-term costs?
- We’re embedded inside the more-than-human world. Destroying the web of life around us implies destroying our relatives and ourselves, even if we may not notice it immediately.

Framing: 4. From sacrifice to opportunity

Framing: From sacrifice to opportunity

- If people feel that others are forcing them to sacrifice their SUVs for the sake of some green future they cannot envision, this makes them resentful.
- If, however, climate change action can promote a better society where
 - people are more considerate,
 - the new electric car has greater acceleration than the old car,
 - climate-friendly food helps to get people in better shape and make them look attractive, then people are interested.
- These opportunity framings can reach audiences that insurance, health or ethics leave cold.

Framing: From sacrifice to opportunity (cont'd)

- The opportunity frame emphasizes that buildings, companies, cities, and societies with low emissions are more efficient and competitive while also providing better jobs.
- To demonstrate leadership in these areas is an investment in future profitability and competitiveness:
“We get better growth and better climate.”

Summary

- In the media, climate change is usually portrayed as ominous.
- People do not want to think about issues that trigger fear *and* helplessness.
- Framings for promoting greater reflection and action on climate change emphasizes the values that matter to people: safety, health, freedom and prosperity.

Additional slides

ipcc

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL ON
climate change



**Recommendations of
the Intergovernmental
Panel on Climate
Change (IPCC)**

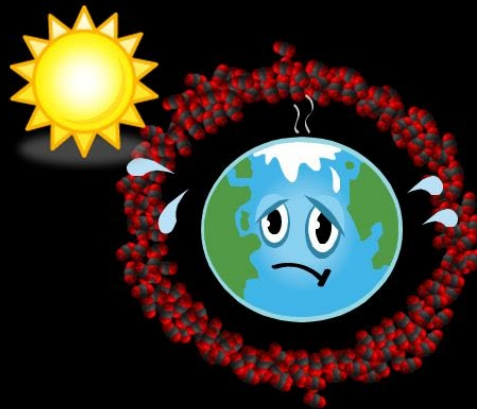
Do not use abstract ideas – Use metaphors and analogies to communicate climate science



Loaded dice: Climate change is loading the weather dice, making some types of extreme weather events more likely

Do not use abstract ideas – Use metaphors and analogies to communicate climate science

The Heat-Trapping Blanket Story

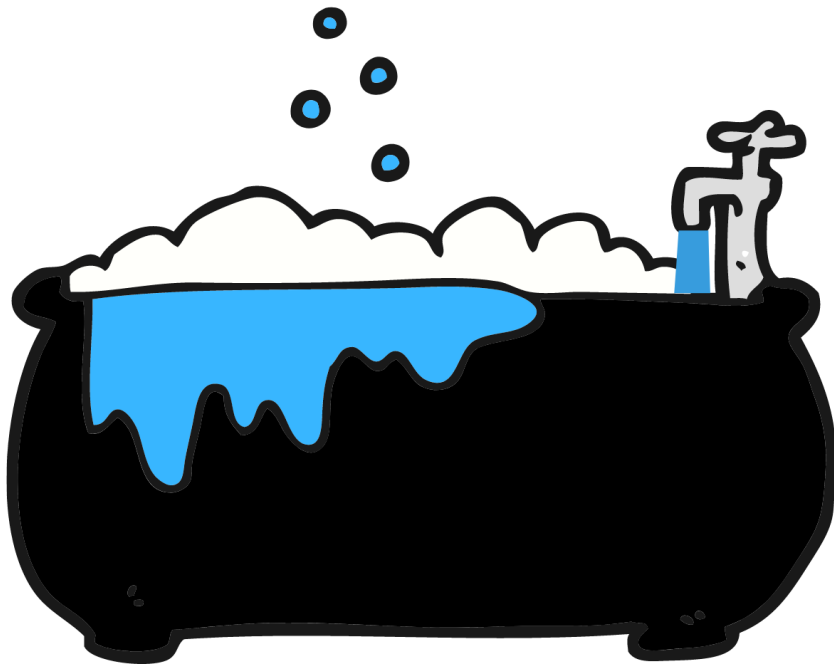


(We used to call this the greenhouse effect.)

This heating is **changing climate**.

The metaphor of greenhouse gases acting as a 'heat trapping blanket' has tested to be an effective metaphor for communicating the basic principle of the greenhouse effect

Do not use abstract ideas – Use metaphors and analogies to communicate climate science



The idea of the atmosphere as a ‘bathtub’ filling up with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases has also been shown to increase comprehension and support for stronger policy action on climate change.

The idea to get across here is that even if we ‘turn off the tap’, existing carbon dioxide emissions will stick around (the bath won’t suddenly become empty).

This could be one way of introducing the idea of Negative Emission Technologies, which would seek to reduce the level of water in the bath.

Tell a human story

- Elements of the storyline:
 - describing the problem,
 - laying out its consequences,
 - talking about solutions.
- Talking about solutions is crucial because research shows that without a clear indication of how people can respond to the risks of climate change, it can feel overwhelming.

Tell a human story

- To involve the audience in your story, the structure has to flow in a way that is familiar to your audience.
- A simple but effective way to achieve that is to use the ABT (And, But, Therefore) template
- It brings 'conflict' and 'resolution' (two key elements of story structure) into your story.

Tell a human story – the ABT (And, But, Therefore) template

The 'And' part of the story is the exposition, the 'But' part brings in the conflict, and 'Therefore' provides the resolution. Below is an example from Chris Shaw, one of the authors of this Handbook, of a personal story using the ABT* approach.

As a parent of two boys I have always enjoyed being able to share with them the experiences and activities that I enjoyed as a child, and seeing the joy on their faces on running into the sea on a warm summer's day, or throwing snowballs in the winter.

And *I get great solace knowing that we were part of an unbroken chain connecting past and future generations.*

But *as I have brought them up I have seen the changing seasons become disrupted and I experienced that as a very deep and profound challenge to my own sense of wellbeing and my sense of what it meant to be a good father.*

Therefore *I made the decision quite late in life to learn what I could about what was happening and what I could do about it, so I returned to university, studied the social science of climate change and now here I am standing in front of you.*

* Olson, R. (2015). Houston, We Have A Narrative: Why Science Needs Story. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Use the most effective visual communication

- **Tell new stories:** Familiar, 'classic' images - polar bears, smoke stacks, deforestation - can prompt cynicism and fatigue. Less familiar (and more thought-provoking) images can help tell a new story about climate change.
- **Show local climate impacts:** When images of localised climate impacts show an individual person or group of people, with identifiable emotions, they are likely to be most powerful.
- Images of climate change impacts can be overwhelming. Coupling images of climate impacts with a **concrete behavioural 'action' for people to take** can help overcome this.

Use the most effective visual communication – Example



Two men repair breached sections of embankment in Sri Lanka.
Photo: Dominic Sansoni/World Bank

Use the most effective visual communication – Example



A solar engineer trainer in India. Photo: UN Women/Gaganjit Singh

References

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