> Climate change is a notoriously 'distant' risk for most people – it feels 'not here' and it feels 'not now'. Anyone who has had any experience trying to engage the public on climate change will likely recognise the challenge of overcoming the so-called 'psychological distance' of the issue, and bringing climate change 'closer to home'. There is a lot of research to support the idea that reducing the psychological distance of climate change is important, but this guide explains why it may not be as straightforward as focusing on 'local' rather than 'global' aspects of the issue.

We humans have well documented difficulties with grasping long-term, gradually changing issues that are complex and system wide. Climate change is a textbook example of this kind of problem. We tend to think that climate change is more likely to impact people and places far away. Taking action seems unattractive since the rewards for doing so are perceived as far off. Moreover, the inherent uncertainty in climate projections allows for wishful thinking (Spence et al, 2012; Marshall, 2014).

This so-called 'psychological distance' makes it difficult to perceive climate change as tangible and immediate. Our minds are simply not designed in a way that responds to cumulative, long-term issues that (without careful communication) do not activate our psychological threat-detection machinery (CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014). **No group of people is spared from this**: a recent paper on how youth engage with climate change found that many young people view it as an equally or even more far-away issue than older people (Corner et al, 2015a).

Communicators have attempted to overcome this psychological distance by talking about climate change as something worthy of an individual's personal concern, or as something that is in the interests of a community to engage with for their own sake. And with good reason: a large body of research shows that people are more likely to be willing to act on climate change if they think that it will impact them (or people they care about and who are similar to them) in the near future. On average, then, a climate communicator's immediate objectives – of engaging a particular

Image credit: 10:10 (CC BY 2.0).
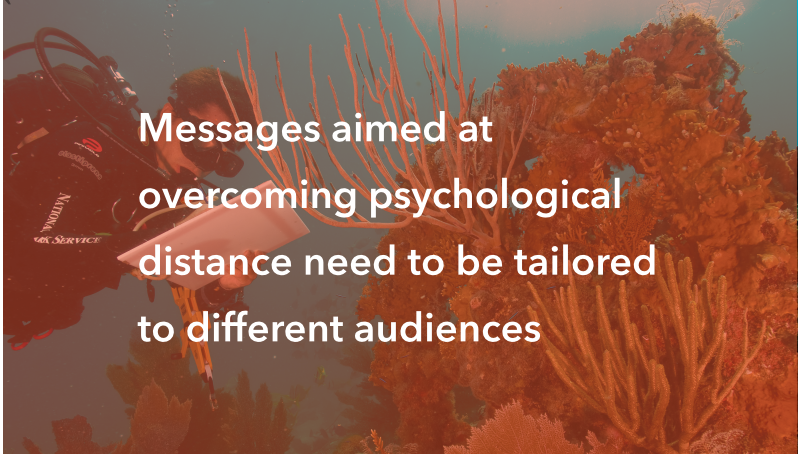*Image has been cropped and tinted and text has been added.*

It is important to show clear, plausible and meaningful actions that people can take in response to climate risks

individual or community – will likely be helped by 'localising' climate change, for example by communicating the current and future impacts of sea-level rise on local communities, or the idea that the spread of infectious diseases is likely to become greater and more intensive (CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014; Spence et al, 2012; Wiest et al, 2015).

However, these strategies are not universally appropriate, and they may even backfire under some conditions. In particular, talking about or visualising the impacts of climate change on a local area can make people feel overwhelmed or emotionally numbed. By doing so, *localising climate change runs the risk of triggering defense mechanisms* such as denial and motivated reasoning (McDonald et al, 2015).

In short, *the psychological distance of*

Messages aimed at overcoming psychological distance need to be tailored to different audiences

Image credit: NPS Climate Change Response (Public Domain Mark 1.0). Image has been cropped and tinted and text has been added.

climate change is complex (for recent literature reviews stressing this point, see ibid and Brügger et al, 2015a). As is how to manage it – the phenomenon consists of several dimensions, such as geographical distance, temporal distance, social distance, and uncertainty/hypothetical distance, and these dimensions may contradict each other and overlap. However, successful management of the psychological distance of climate change is both possible and necessary. On the next page we outline some do's and don'ts for communicators to follow.

Image credit: CIAT (CC BY-SA 2.0). Image has been tinted and text has been added.

"What do you love that is threatened by climate change?"

Do's and don'ts to keep in mind

Box 1 lists five important general do's that climate communicators need to have in mind if they are to be effective and avoid backlash when they try to localise climate change:

BOX 1: *Effective ways of reducing the psychological distance of climate change*

Communicate solutions Due to the risk of triggering defense mechanisms, it is important for attempts of localising climate change to show and describe clear, plausible and meaningful actions that people can take in response to climate risks – as well as acceptable, feasible and effective solutions to the overall problems depicted (see research overviews Brügger, 2015a and CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014). Moreover, *the proposed solutions need to be on par with what the audience can actually do*. For example, a small-town farmer will want adaptation solutions that he or she can achieve – narratives about what members of parliament should do will likely not engage rural audiences (Brügger, 2015b).

Tell human stories Stories are hugely powerful. A simple, coherent story can easily trump a complex and boring account laden with scientific jargon (Kahneman, 2012). Climate communication has to understand this if it is to compete with effective rejectionist narratives. In line with the need to communicate solutions, the stories told should convey self-efficacy (i.e. meaningful specific actions that the individual/community can take) and they should be *human stories, containing people that the audience can relate to and identify with* (CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014; Corner et al, 2015b), so-called 'similar others'.

Don't trivialise Research for example on using local imagery has found that it can be disengaging, because "it will only affect locals and is not as much of a global issue" (O'Neill and Hulme, 2009). Our research at Climate Outreach points to the danger of trivialising the interaction between people and climate change – in images or in written materials. The 'For the Love Of' campaign (for which Climate Outreach provided the research) is a good example of connecting climate change to people's lives without trivialising the issue, by asking people *'What do you love that is threatened by climate change?'*

Use the right images Forthcoming Climate Outreach research shows the importance of using images of local climate impacts that are authentic (unposed and unfaked) and contain individuals that the viewer can identify with. The best images tell a multi-layered story and are ideally not overly clichéd. *Emotionally powerful images of localised climate impacts should be coupled with images depicting solutions* to climate change to overcome the risk of helplessness or hopelessness.

Focus on when, not if An example of a common impacts message is "By 2072, sea levels will rise by between 25 and 68 cm, with 50 cm being the average projection". However, its structure places the emphasis on the future and on outcome uncertainty, rather than on the intended point that the outcome is certain but the time is not. Reversed logics are therefore better, such as "Sea levels will rise by at least 50 cm, and this will occur at some time between 2060 and 2093" (Corner et al, 2015b; CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014).

Audience-specific factors

Messages aimed at overcoming psychological distance need to be tailored to different audiences. Box 2 outlines three important factors regarding the audience characteristics:

BOX 2: *Audience-specific factors to keep in mind when interacting with psychological distance*

Values, ideology and place attachment An individual's values and ideology determine their climate-related views and behaviours to a large extent (see for example the Climate Outreach research Marshall et al, 2015). They also influence the effectiveness of attempts to reduce psychological distance (McDonald et al, 2015). For example, studies have shown that locally-framed messages fare differently depending on the recipient's political affiliation (Wiest et al, 2015), and that messages about local impacts may actually reduce the level of concern about climate change of people who mainly hold self-enhancing values such as power, wealth and authority, (Schoenefeld & McCauley, 2015), perhaps due to defensive mechanisms kicking in. (For more on this study, see the authors' Climate Outreach guest blog post.) (Brügger, 2015a). However, localising may backfire also for audiences holding mainly self-transcending values (the opposite of self-enhancing values) such as equality and social justice, if their attention is drawn away from the larger, global consequences that will be wrought by climate change (ibid; cf. McDonald et al, 2015: cf. Spence et al, 2012). A person's 'place attachment' – mix of emotional bonds to the local place, the nation, another countries, and the planet as a whole – also matters greatly. For example, individuals expressing stronger global than local place attachments have been shown to be more likely to attribute climate change to human influence and to be positive towards climate action (Devine-Wright, Price & Leviston, 2015). In addition, place attachment also seems to determine whether one prefers mitigation (global concern) or adaptation (local concern) (McDonald et al, 2015). *Making the impacts of climate change 'personal' thus does not necessarily mean making them local, but more about making a connection between 'here' and wider issues.* In summary, then, it is clear that getting to know one's audience and carefully tailoring one's message is crucial.

Nature of the ask Whether the localising frame asks for personal-level action also matters. Recent research showed that *localising climate change yields different results depending on the specific 'ask' made of recipients* – for example, localising in order to increase support for collective mitigation action will affect audiences differently to localising with the aim of increasing intentions to carry out personal-level local adaptation measures. Particularly striking is that localising on the spatial dimension of psychological distance seems more likely to bolster adaptation than to bolster mitigation (Brügger et al, 2015).

Magnitude of previous experience Personal experiences of extreme weather events often reduce the psychological distance of climate change, thereby increasing climate threat perceptions, policy support and behaviour-change intentions (McDonald et al, 2015; Spence et al, 2012) – *assuming that people interpret their experiences as attributable to climate change* (Brügger et al, 2015a). However, not all audiences with such experiences will be open to climate messages (see the Climate Outreach research Messling et al, 2015; also see CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014). For example, many US east coast victims of 2012 Superstorm Sandy adamantly did not want to talk about climate change at all when prompted. This could be the result of psychological defense mechanisms – the prospect of such a catastrophe happening again can be too much to bear, especially in the midst of difficult rebuilding efforts. Moreover, it is also possible that a socially constructed silence was collectively put in place in order not to stress the community further in its time of sorrow and hardship (Marshall, 2014; cf. CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014). *If a climate communicator is to engage recent victims of disastrous extreme weather, they therefore need to be sensitive to the vulnerable state of the audience.* For example, talking about climate change with people who have survived traumatising climate-related experiences – just as with talking with disaster victims in general – is more likely to be productive if safe spaces can be created. Proper facilitation of emotional acknowledgement and dialogue about (for example) fear and mourning is important (Marshall, 2014; Weintrobe, 2013).

Sensory communication and perspective taking

Several promising creative approaches to managing the psychological distance of climate change have recently gained traction. One longstanding approach that is nonetheless still largely unused in practice is to use experiential and sensory communication, with the purpose of *making distant events tangible through so-called 'indirect direct exposure'* (see for example CRED & ecoAmerica, 2014; Sterman, 2011; Marx et al, 2007; Corner et al, 2015b). Suggested (and to some extent tested) strategies range from simulations, art and painting sea level lines on buildings, to simply making people talk to each other about the issue so as to break the culturally constructed silence surrounding climate change.
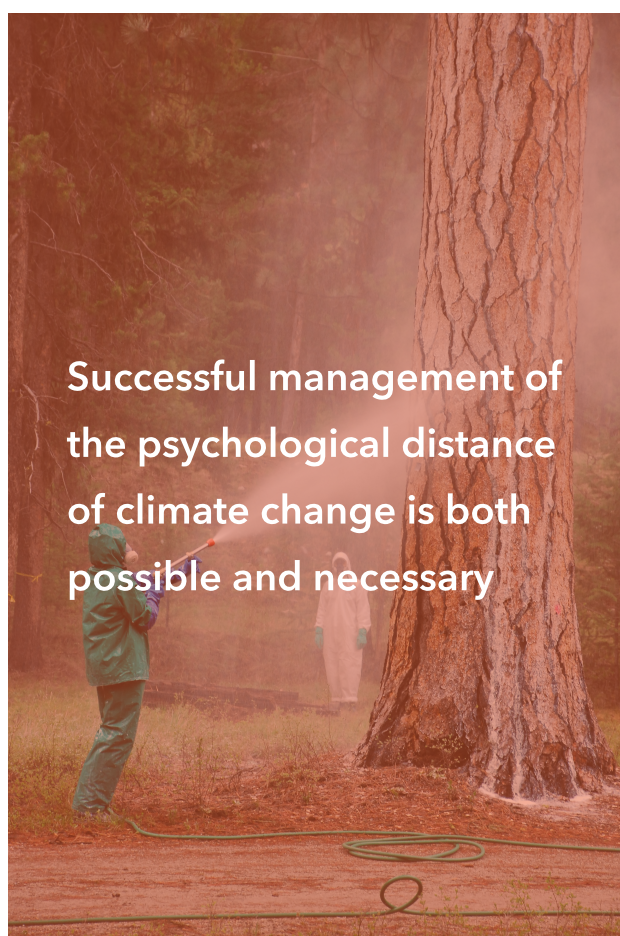
An even more novel approach is 'perspective taking', i.e attempting to reduce psychological distance by making audiences look at climate change from different viewpoints. One way to do this is to make the audience take the perspective of a future person experiencing climate change (McDonald et al, 2015). Another is to *utilise people's general willingness to pass on positive legacies* (knowledge, skills, resources etc.) when they pass away. This is distinct to the more familiar 'think of

the children' arguments. The idea is to activate people's latent motivations to extend themselves into the future by using communication techniques that make long-term goals and motives more salient. Thus, the audience's preferences are shifted from their present selves to future others (see Marshall, 2014 and Zaval et al, 2015; cf. McDonald et al, 2015). A recent experimental questionnaire study had half of its participants commence by writing an essay about how they would have a positive impact on future generations. Compared with the control group, this resulted in significantly higher behavioural-change intentions and general belief in climate change, as well as higher amounts of potential earnings from a fictional participation bonus lottery donated to charity (Zaval et al, 2015).

Successful management of the psychological distance of climate change is both possible and necessary

Image credit: US Forest Service Northern Region (CC BY 2.0). Image has been tinted and text has been added.

In conclusion, strategies aiming to localise climate change can result in attitudinal and behavioural change, but there are multiple caveats which govern the effectiveness of this approach. Paying attention to these will help ensure that attempts to artificially 'bring climate change home' don't unintentionally backfire, but rather help to bolster public engagement – before climate change does it for us.

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About Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach (formerly COIN) is a charity focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 10 years of experience helping our partners to talk and think about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, trades unions, business and faith organisations.

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