

Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach are a team of social scientists and communication specialists working to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change.

Through our social research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences and lead to action.

We have over 14 years experience working with a wide range of partners around the world including central, regional and local governments, international bodies, charities, business, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Executive summary

- ➤ If we are serious about a 1.5 °C world, then we need to get serious about public engagement.
- ➤ Achieving a 1.5 °C world involves: radical policy change, which will not be introduced or successfully implemented without public consent; lifestyle change on a range of totemic issues like diet, personal travel and home heating; and the potential use of new technologies to suck carbon dioxide out of the air, about which public opinion is likely to be extremely cautious.
- ➤ Limiting temperature rise to 1.5 °C means rapid and transformative action across the world, and not just in a few key nations. This means more research is needed on how to engage with citizens outside a narrow range of countries where climate communications has mostly focused so far.
- ➤ The developing science of climate change communication provides empirically-grounded approaches for building public engagement and catalysing a societal response. This includes the need to build public engagement upwards from people's values, rather than starting with the 'big numbers' of climate policy and working downwards.
- ➤ In the future, more focus is needed on effective ways to encourage rapid and wide-scale changes in impactful climate actions, and less on producing small tweaks in climate-related behaviours.
- ➤ Widespread and ongoing public engagement at scale needs widespread support and is often likely to be delivered by governments. In order to create this, we need to have a global understanding of best practice initiatives and how to roll them out, rather than engage in uncoordinated and ill-informed initiatives.
- ➤ Article 6 of the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) commits all the world's nations to engaging citizens on climate change, but too little attention has been paid to it thus far. A global communications 'league' could monitor and compare countries' efforts.
- ➤ Building public engagement for 1.5 °C also means building understanding of the best ways to engage with people in different cultures and contexts, creating innovative new methods of peer-to-peer dialogue, and supporting outreach capacity.



Why public engagement matters for a 1.5 °C world

While governments and advocates have largely focused on the technological, economic and political changes needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, far less attention has been paid to engaging the public in the global response to climate change. What does it mean to live in a changing climate? How do public attitudes play into the global policy discourse on climate change? Are rapid emissions cuts possible without major social transformation, given the need for significant lifestyle change across a range of behaviours currently considered 'normal' (in wealthy countries) or 'aspirational' (in developing countries)?

Public engagement is critical for a 1.5 °C world.

The international community agreed in 2015 to "pursue efforts" to limit warming to 1.5 °C by the end of the century, as part of the Paris agreement on climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) October 2018 Special Report lays out the vast array of social, political, cultural, economic and technological changes this would entail.

This Special Report effectively abandons the assumption – often made in public debate and policy – that only those in power can make change, and that significant action in one sector or region means less action is needed elsewhere. This level of transition requires **accelerated action across the world**, at all levels of society. For the first time, the report therefore includes some coverage of the social science of public engagement – a recognition of this crucial, but historically underrepresented, piece of the climate change puzzle.²

Limiting warming to 1.5 °C means rapid **policy change** in agriculture, the built environment and transport sectors amongst many others. Governments in democratic nations are extremely unlikely to put these changes - which may involve significant short-term costs - in place without public consent. Even if implemented, the most carefully considered policy interventions

will backfire if they don't take into account how people respond (even outside of democracies). Seemingly 'win-win' technologies and ideas, such as free home insulation schemes, are not taken up if they are

unpopular or if the public views them as irrelevant.

The 1.5 °C target also requires **lifestyle changes** on a range of totemic issues like diet, personal travel and home heating in a relatively short period of time. Without public buy-in, these could prompt significant resistance. Given the short timescale, the infrastructure of public engagement needs to be put in place just as the infrastructure of policy change does.

The impacts of climate change are already being felt and people across the world are increasingly making the link between extreme weather and a changing climate.³

However, there is still a huge amount of work to do to ensure that rising seas, wildfires and intensifying hurricanes do not provoke a defensive reaction among affected communities, who have every reason to hope that predictions of a changing climate will not come true.⁴ Authentic, constructive narratives that link climate impacts, adaptive decision making, and the need to reduce emissions are essential.

% od rescue in the USA. Staff Sgt. Manuell

Finally, meeting 1.5 °C probably means using methods of **sucking carbon dioxide out of the air**, or maybe even reflecting sunlight back into space in order to produce a temporary cooling effect. Perhaps unsurprisingly, initial studies of public opinion suggest people are cautious, cynical or strongly opposed to some of these methods.⁵ The social sciences have a crucial role to play as these unfamiliar and mostly unproven technologies make their way on to the policy agenda, providing a critical public perspective on earth-changing interventions that could, if approached in the wrong way, be as dangerous as climate change itself.

All of this suggests that if we are serious about a 1.5 °C world, then we need to get serious about public engagement.



Evidence-based principles for public engagement

The rapidly developing science of climate change communication provides empirically-grounded approaches for building public engagement and catalysing a societal response. It is an evolving field, but there are some strong areas of agreement, including:

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Values, worldviews and political ideology

Values, worldviews and political ideology are much more fundamental in shaping people's views or engagement with the issue than how much they know about it.⁶ Messages about energy and climate change are more effective in building meaningful public engagement if framed around shared communal values rather than narrow economic self-interest.⁷ Build public engagement from the 'values-up' rather than downwards from the 'big numbers' of the climate change policy discourse.



Anecdotes and stories

Most communication happens via anecdotes and stories, not graphs and statistics. Framing messages to engage with people who hold diverse sets of values across the political spectrum is essential.⁸ Communications must tell relatable human stories to shift climate change from a scientific to a social reality.





Engaging hearts and minds

Early climate change campaigns focused on 'simple and painless' lifestyle changes and more recent approaches grounded in behavioural economics tend to encourage isolated and unthinking behavioural change.⁹ But for a complex challenge like climate change, they may be the wrong tools for the wrong job. To overcome the problem of 'rebound effects' and encourage 'spillover' between different behaviours,¹⁰ it is crucial to get beyond focusing on minor individual behaviours and engage hearts and minds, **moving from 'nudge' to 'think' as a strategy for public engagement.**

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Imagery and spokespeople

To allow wider audiences to see themselves in the climate story, the imagery and spokespeople associated with climate change in the public mind need to be diversified. This means reaching out to and supporting representatives from a range of social groups who have their own particular concerns about climate change. Climate change needs new communicators who can speak with authenticity and integrity, using language and themes that lift the issue out of the margins and into the mainstream. It is crucial to promote new voices to reach beyond the usual suspects.

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Participatory public engagement

To have the greatest impact, participatory public engagement – climate conversations – needs to happen through existing social networks. One-way communication has a role to play, but as evidence from other social shifts demonstrates, it is vital that peer-to-peer engagement takes place across society. Building and supporting community engagement is a must for effective engagement.

This summary draws on Talking Climate: From research to practice in public engagement, by Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke; and a recent 'expert elicitation' workshop convened as part of the Climate Communication Project¹² supported by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).



Scaling up: global targets require research into global public engagement

Evidence suggests that citizens of nations from many poorer regions of the world are more concerned about climate change than those in wealthier countries, but often this doesn't go beyond a limited understanding.¹³ Most in depth research on communication

understanding.¹³ Most in depth research on communication and engagement has been carried out in a narrow and fairly unrepresentative set of nations – UK, North America and

Australia particularly. Despite regular calls in academic papers for a more international focus, the knowledge base remains, for the most part, restricted.

The global research which does exist tends to consist of large scale quantitative analyses of public awareness. One survey of 119 countries, for example, reports that worldwide, educational attainment is the single strongest predictor of climate change awareness. In Latin America and Europe, people are more likely to understand the risks of climate change if they understand that it is caused by humans, whereas perception of local temperature change is the strongest predictor in many African and Asian countries.¹⁴

This research provides valuable insights but doesn't always attend to the more local scale cultural and social factors which are so important in understanding how best to communicate climate change to these publics.¹⁵

Cooperative agriculture in Guinea. UN

There is a corresponding lack of public engagement initiatives in most key nations around the world, despite some isolated exceptions. For example countries such as China, Russia and Turkey¹⁶ are critical for achieving a 1.5 °C world, yet research suggests that little effort has been made to connect their populations with the challenges of climate change. Often, initiatives are focused on local environmental problems and do not make a link to the global context of climate change, or if they do they are not of sufficient quality to effectively engage across their citizens.¹⁷ Some countries have less democratic accountability and public participation in decision making overall, which may shift the equation. But notwithstanding this, the almost total absence of public engagement on climate change is concerning.



Shifting gear: the need for more ambitious research into public engagement

Even in western countries where more research has been undertaken, a great deal of work is still needed to understand how to shift attitudes and behaviours around totemic, identity-driven and cherished behaviours like meat-eating or flying. Social science has a huge amount to contribute on challenges like these, but the field has too often focused on less impactful – but easier to study and change – pro-environmental behaviours like recycling or reusing coffee cups.

Leading environmental behaviour specialists have argued that research should focus more on effective ways to encourage rapid and wide-scale changes in climate mitigation actions, and less on understanding the structure of climate change beliefs.¹⁸

Collaborations between social scientists and communicators are essential to shifting gear on public engagement research. Practitioners need to be involved in helping to shape research questions, and researchers need to orient their studies towards practical questions and ambitious decarbonisation goals. Just as health professionals and new social norms on good health behaviours have catalysed a wealth of applied social science on healthy lifestyles, so communicators and researchers must now work together to define, promote and describe low-carbon lifestyles – building public engagement with what life in a 1.5 °C world really means.



Recommendations

Global change requires widespread and ongoing public engagement at a scale that largely has to be delivered by governments, informed by a global evidence base on how to do it well. Researchers and communicators are also needed to inform and support efforts, provide training, develop best practice and hold governments to account.



A global communications 'league'

Making commitments and monitoring progress must underpin global public engagement efforts. Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – since renamed 'Action for Climate Empowerment'¹⁹ – commits all the world's nations to engaging their citizens on climate change.²⁰ The measure has also been included in the 2015 Paris Agreement and has initiated an ongoing dialogue,²¹ including the release of guidelines for accelerating solutions through education, training, and public awareness.²²

Overall, whilst this process is developing momentum, it appears to lack the capacity and buy-in from governments that is needed. Invigorating and giving it increased weight in international policy circles would be a significant step forward. One way of driving this could be the creation of a new global communications 'league' to monitor and assess nations' activities on climate communication, highlighting best practice and stimulating a desire to collaborate in achieving effective public engagement. Such a tool could be modelled on initiatives to monitor nations' emissions and progress against their Nationally Determined Contributions on climate change (NDCs) such as developed by Climate Action Tracker.23



Collaboration between social sciences at scale

Research exploring and driving best practice focused on these tough challenges is vital if they are to be dealt with quickly enough. The UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recently announced a five year investment in a research Centre focusing on the social transformations required to bring about rapid decarbonisation. The Centre will become a hub for social science research that asks tough questions about lifestyle change – exactly the kind of academic infrastructure required for a 1.5 °C world.²⁴

The new initiative Rapid Transition Alliance²⁵ offers a promising take on the challenge of 'shifting gear' on low-carbon behaviour change. By analysing previous rapid societal shifts (e.g. around smoking and sexual behaviours related to HIV and AIDS), the initiative takes an evidence-based approach to learning lessons from past campaigns and public behavioural shifts.



Advertising campaigns informed by the best research

Climate change is, because of its nature, a very challenging issue for people to relate to – so any campaign needs to be informed by the best research insights to be successful.²⁶ Simply taking a 'standard' advertising approach to climate change is unlikely to be effective, and in some historical cases appears to have further polarised the debate.



Developing new ways to research and catalyse narratives around the world

Future Resilience for African Cities and Lands (FRACTAL) is a cross-disciplinary group of researchers, aiming to advance scientific knowledge about regional climate responses to human activities. Researchers from three cities developed climate risk narratives, and then tested and refined these using a process of values-based dialogue with decision makers and interested parties over a period of a few months.

Climate Outreach's Global Narratives Project creates a simple, low-input method of training climate communicators in different countries around the world, and building capacity for delivering communications programmes. The approach uses narrative workshops²⁷ to explore the values and identity of participants, discuss the core issues, and examine trial narratives. Successful projects have already been completed in India and Canada, and are starting in Lebanon.



Understanding and tracking public attitudes

Key to being able to understand the effectiveness of public engagement is the ability to monitor how successful it is with different segments of the population. When done comprehensively, this can not only identify long term trends but also enable initiatives to be refined and enhanced. For example the international Aid Attitudes Tracker examines public attitudes and behaviours towards development, global poverty and overseas aid in four major donor countries, with the research informing public engagement. Some governments and academic institutions - for example the UK government²⁸ and Yale University²⁹ in the USA - carry out regular surveys tracking public attitudes towards climate and energy issues.



Climate change spokespeople informed by the social science of climate communication

Spokespeople, whether climate scientists, journalists or government officials, have a critical role in public understanding when it comes to climate change. Yet whilst a great deal of effort is often put into understanding data points and attribution calculations, rarely is the same energy invested in understanding

how to communicate these efforts. An example of attempting to address this comes from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change whose Working Group I Technical Support Unit commissioned Climate Outreach to produce a communication handbook for the IPCC scientists in 2018.30



Creating and supporting peer-to-peer dialogue

Evidence from public engagement campaigns around challenging social issues like health shows that broadcast approaches – such as advertising campaigns – should be complemented by community and peer-to-peer initiatives.³¹

In an effort to build on this understanding, the devolved Scottish Government, for example, has included the community Climate Conversations model developed by Climate Outreach in its 2018 Climate Change Plan.³² This is designed to enable local people to discuss the challenges and solutions to climate change in their own communities, using their own language and experiences. Such a

using their own language and experiences. Such a framework is also intended to create an ongoing dialogue between government and the people of Scotland, allowing the government to both share and hear responses to its low carbon policies.

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