

YOUNG VOICES

**HOW DO 18-25 YEAR OLDS
ENGAGE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE?**

PROJECT TEAM

Dr Adam Corner is COIN's Research Director, and an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Psychology at Cardiff University. He specialises in the psychology of communicating climate change, and writes regularly for national media including the Guardian and New Scientist.

Olga Roberts is COIN's Researcher. She specialises in sceptical discourses on climate change and the engagement of hard-to-reach audiences.

Agathe Pellisier provided administrative support to this project.

ABOUT COIN

The Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN) is a charity focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have 10 years of experience helping our partners 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 organizations including UK government departments, local government, charities, faith organizations and many others.

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YOUNG VOICES ON CLIMATE CHANGE

*“Climate change is REAL. It affects you!
What are you going to do about it?”*

*“Climate change is relevant and happening now.
We need to stand up and make change.
The more you do, the quicker this will no longer be a problem
but a solution. This affects your jobs, homes, power, lifestyle.”*

*“Climate change is everyone’s problem. It demands immediate
transformation of the way we live. From the bottom up. And
responsible, effective policies from our representative governments on
clean energy, independence, smart technology and innovation in the
sustainability agenda, by people like you.”*

*“97% of scientists agree that climate change isn’t just a problem for
the future – it’s happening here and now. Our current generation
needs to support effective climate policy to lower our carbon
footprint and protect those we love from the risks of climate change.”*

*“The effects of climate change on your daily life are more significant
than you think. The flooding in your back yard, the changing food
prices in the local market and so on. And it will become more
extreme with the temperature increase. Take action now to reduce
the global emissions. Talk to your local authority to see what you can
do for a more sustainable future.”*

THE SUMMARY

Young people are in a unique position as they face the reality of a changing climate: potentially they are best-placed to push for and define the long-term societal response to climate change, yet they're also the most vulnerable to the legacy of decisions made by older generations. Although young adults arguably have the most to gain and the most to lose in a changing climate, their voices are not prominent, and engagement with climate change among this crucial demographic is in many ways limited. While some studies have captured young people's views about climate change, very few have attempted to explore the ways in which young adults could be more effectively engaged. The findings in the current report provide valuable lessons for communicating with young people about climate change. While some of these follow from existing research, others challenge conventional wisdom, underscoring the crucial importance of audience research in developing strategies for climate change communication.

This report describes the key findings from a series of discussion workshops involving 36 young adults in the UK during May/June 2014. The workshops aimed to give a voice to the young people participating, explore their views about climate change and encourage discussion about how to improve climate change communication with young adults. Based on the key findings, the following recommendations for more effective engagement were derived:

- **Don't talk about how climate change will impact future generations.** Young people see this as a problem for the *here and now* and will respond positively to messages that frame climate change as a contemporary concern that requires an immediate response.
- **Show how climate change relates to (and will affect) the aspects of young people's everyday lives that they care about.** Young people are receptive to the idea of protecting the 'things they love' from climate change. However, the devil is in the detail – the things young people love and want to protect should not be *assumed* but instead identified through audience research. To avoid trivialising the issue, it is important to always make the link between the

‘everyday’ and the ‘bigger picture’, joining the dots between the personal and the political.

- **Don’t focus on ‘fighting the sceptics’.** Most participants were either unaware or uninterested in the idea of organised climate change scepticism, suggesting that campaigns to counteract science-based scepticism will not be particularly useful for this audience. Debating solutions – rather than the science – is a much higher priority.
- **Some commonly used climate advocacy phrases are either unfamiliar or unpopular with young people.** Phrases such as ‘more ambitious climate policy’ and ‘managing climate risks’ are considered hollow, technocratic and vague, while terminology such as ‘2 degrees’ and even ‘decarbonisation’ may be unfamiliar or disengaging. Climate jargon needs to be explained in plain language.
- **The notion that there is a ‘97% consensus’ among scientists on climate change was widely viewed as a compelling and persuasive statistic** but was not necessarily enough on its own to inspire an action-oriented response among young people. There is widespread doubt that there is a ‘concerned majority’ among the general public who support action on climate change. Communicating that there is a ‘social consensus’ on climate action may therefore be just as important as communicating the scientific consensus.
- **Messages about climate change should be as specific as possible in the actions they recommend.** Young people are willing to pressure political leaders for more progressive climate change decisions but do not, as a general rule, have much faith in politicians and other elite decision makers. Asking this audience to ‘challenge’ policy makers may therefore be more effective than asking them to ‘support’ them. Clearly set out what needs to be done – who, when, where and what young people can do to make a difference – and which policy prescriptions support this.
- **Young people sometimes find it difficult to talk about climate change to their peers** because of a perception that it comes with a certain stigma and is ‘uncool’, or preachy to do so. Initiatives to engage young people should take this into account, and consider how discussion of climate change can be ‘normalised’ among this demographic.

- **Climate change messages must be communicated by a trustworthy messenger** (not a corporation or politician) and combined with a specific call to action. Peer networks and social media are important sources of information on climate change for young people. Generally speaking, young people are suspicious of the mainstream media, with the exception of the BBC, which is widely trusted as a provider of reliable information.
- **Avoid language that might be perceived as ‘preachy’ or guilt-inducing.** While concrete, tangible actions were popular, it is important to present these as things people *can* rather than *should* do. Appeals to moral duty were seen as unlikely to be motivating for the majority of the population.

THE BACKGROUND

Young people and climate change in context

Public concern about climate change in the UK has been relatively high since polling began 25 years ago. However, climate change is typically relegated in the public mind behind issues such as the economy, health or education.¹ The situation for young people is no different, with polls suggesting that concerns about employment and economic stress trump worries about issues such as climate change.² This is the context against which campaigns to engage young people on climate change must be viewed: there are many competing priorities for this age group's attention, as well as concerns and worries that are, in many ways, more pressing than climate change.

One particular challenge is the level and extent of political engagement among young people. Fewer people have voted in the last three general elections than they ever have in the past,³ and reported turnout rates for the 2010 General Election were particularly low for young adults.⁴ However, it is more accurate to say that young people are disenchanted and alienated by the formal political process rather than apathetic,⁵ with widespread scepticism about formal political parties and 'career' politicians. Both tend to be perceived as self-serving, unrepresentative and unresponsive to young people.⁶

Young people's views on climate change

Typically, surveys show young people exhibit relatively high levels of reported concern on climate change. A recent nationally representative NUS survey found, for example, that 70% of students were either *very* or *fairly* concerned about climate change (broadly comparable to levels of concern among the general population).⁷ But in contrast to the polling data, one recent qualitative study in the UK (based on interviews and focus groups with 16-26 year-olds) revealed a notable lack of concern, with respondents reporting feelings of pessimism, disempowerment and inaction in relation to climate change.⁸ There was a widespread perception that climate change did not play any major role in their day-to-day lives, with most reporting that it came very low on their priority list. Reasons cited included a lack of relevance and

connection to their everyday lives, a lack of resources in terms of time, money and available low-carbon infrastructure, and an absence of shared values and practices to encourage sustainable lifestyles. Sparse and ineffective coverage by the media was also given as a major reason for participants' disengagement with the issue.

As in the general population, specific knowledge about climate change is quite limited. In a 2013 survey, about half of 18-24 year-olds said they knew '*a little*' or '*hardly anything*' about climate change,⁹ while only 7% of 18-34 year-olds in a separate survey chose the 'correct' answer of '2 degrees' in response to the question '*how many degrees Celsius do you think global temperatures need to rise for climate change to become dangerous?*'¹⁰

Despite this (and underlining the consistent finding among older adult populations that there is not a straightforward relationship between knowledge and concern about climate change), scepticism about climate change tends to be lower among younger age groups¹¹ and in some studies has been found to be absent altogether.¹² Plus, there is a high degree of recognition among this age group that climate change is happening 'now'. An NUS¹³ survey found 61% of students believe the UK is '*already experiencing*' the effects of climate change, while 55% of 18-24s polled by YouGov in early 2014 - the largest percentage of any age group - agreed with the statement that recent flooding in the UK was the result of climate change.¹⁴ However, young adults still view climate change as primarily affecting the developing world and 'far away' places.¹⁵

As is the case in the general population, being informed about climate change is not, on its own, sufficient to produce significant pro-environmental behavioural changes or political activism among young people.¹⁶ Research from several different countries indicates that young people tend to engage in 'minimal inconvenience' behaviours, such as switching the lights off or recycling,¹⁷ even when they are aware that more inconvenient behavioural changes (such as using public transport instead of private vehicles) or more political, public actions (such as protesting or bringing pressure to bear on policy makers) are likely to be more effective.¹⁸

THE RESEARCH

Summary of methods

During May and June 2014, in London and Oxford, a series of four ‘narrative workshops’ explored participants’ views on climate change and climate policies, and a set of four ‘narratives’ about climate change. These ‘narratives’ were short pieces of written text that used different language to describe climate change, and policies that could be employed to address it. Narrative approaches are increasingly viewed as a promising way of deepening public engagement on climate change,¹⁹ allowing careful attention to be paid to the words and phrases that members of the public respond to, and providing a vehicle for building on core values that underpin engagement with climate change and sustainability.

36 young adults living in the UK participated in the research, in groups of between 5-12. 19 were British and 17 were non-British nationals.²⁰ The majority were university students (29), mainly post-graduates. Nearly half expressed a strong commitment to the environment, having either studied a related subject and/or been involved in green campaigning. Participants were recruited by approaching student organisations, youth-focused non-governmental organisations, as well as youth clubs and volunteering networks.

COIN developed a recruitment questionnaire comprised of 12 items drawn from Schwartz’s ‘Values Inventory’.²¹ This allowed us to get a snapshot of the values deemed important by participants in the study. Items were selected that reflected each of the four ‘categories’ of Schwartz values: self-transcending (values that transcend self-interest, and which are known to consistently predict positive engagement with climate change); openness to change (values which related to freedom, curiosity and pleasure); security (values which have to do with conformity, tradition and safety) and self-enhancing (values which relate to self-enhancement, and which tend to be negatively associated with concern about climate change).

The three most popular values were mostly ‘self-transcendent’ items, including ‘Enjoying Life’, ‘Social Justice’ and ‘Responsibility’, with ‘Protecting the Environment

the fourth most popular value. The least popular values were mostly self-enhancing: 'Wealth', 'Authority' and 'Respect for Tradition'.²²

With the support of the Grantham Institute, the workshops were conducted in two separate phases, held a fortnight apart:

Phase 1 employed a 'funnel' design, where participants first discussed their shared values and sense of identity, their hopes for the future and their aspirations. The topic of climate change was then introduced through this lens in order to explore how the group's values and worldviews affected their attitudes and beliefs about climate change.

Phase 2 used facilitated discussion to evaluate four different narratives about climate change, gathering participants' feedback on the words, phrases and frames contained within them. These drew on the views that participants expressed in Phase 1 and the existing literature on how young people engage with climate change.

Finally, participants were asked to write their own narratives either independently or building on the preceding four narratives, to help understand which elements were most favoured by young adults for communicating to their peers.

THE FINDINGS

Participants' values & politics

When asked what qualities they admired in a person, the most popular answer was honesty, with closely related principles such as empathy, trust, fairness and compassion also attracting support. There was widespread appreciation for openness and a sense that others' opinions ought to be respected, even if they were different from an individual's own. These findings closely match previous COIN research with other audiences, including centre-right citizens and members of trade unions, suggesting there are some core values which diverse social constituencies hold.²³ While concerns particular to young people (such as the difficulty of finding employment, the cost of education, and the lack of representation for under-25s in government) were often mentioned, there was not a strong sense of 'identity' among any of the four groups – as 'young people' or any other easily identifiable label. There was an emphatic lack of trust and identification with mainstream political parties, and a strong sense of disillusionment with manifesto promises, which were seen as too easily broken and meaningless:

"I don't feel there is a party that fully represents me."

"There needs to be a major overhaul in politics. It's all quite dark and seedy. You never really know what's going on. I think it needs to be a bit more transparent."

"I used to be quite political, I wasn't a member, but I followed a political party and now, if there was a general election, I probably wouldn't bother going out to vote and that upsets me...my attitude is it's a waste of my time really."

"When you're not in power you talk the talk but when you get in power you're more into the general picture and prioritise economic concerns than perhaps more idealistic concerns."

Views about climate change

Climate change was mentioned spontaneously by participants in three of the four groups in Phase 1. There was a fairly even split between those who expressed optimism about the future and those who expressed fear, suggesting that a world with a changed climate would also be a world with changed values. Participants expressed concern about the world they would leave to their own children and talked about the kind of world they would like to see in the future:

“I’m scared of what the future will hold.”

“There’s a bit of anger from all sections of society, but the youth especially ... climate change is certainly one of the things that young people want to be discussed a lot more, and more action needs to be distilled from that.”

“I feel like I’m going to have to fight for [the values] I received [from my parents] and what I want to keep giving to my kids because it is very individualistic these days. I truly hope that it’s not going to be the case and people will realise that it’s not working and change that but I’m actually very, very scared of the future, especially for my children because I have no idea what it’s going to be like. The values are going to be very different; the climate is going to be very different.”

Climate change was variously described as a “*self-evident fact*” and the “*biggest issue facing mankind*”, but a sense of hopelessness and inevitability was expressed through a long list of impending impacts – melting ice caps, rising sea levels, loss of agricultural land, the scarcity of fresh water, migration, the northward advance of tropical diseases and polar bears stranded on icebergs – as well as the extreme weather events already occurring in many countries.

Only a couple of participants expressed any doubts about the seriousness of the problem, with the majority suggesting that society has yet to grasp the urgency of the problem, supporting previous research suggesting that scepticism about climate change is uncommon among the young:

“It’s definitely happening now...When you think about it, maybe you haven’t experienced it yet, but you will experience it in some way in the next 50 years, and maybe even sooner than that because we are reaching a tipping point. All these things are gradually adding up.”

"Since we were born we have heard about the bad effects of climate change. I think we are more aware of this than the older generation."

Typically participants seemed uninterested in engaging with debates around whether climate change is happening, and instead focused on what to do about it. Arguing with organised scepticism was seen as a waste of energy by the few participants who were aware of it:

“Having a head to head battle with climate sceptics, I think is a waste of energy.”

The workshops took place fairly soon after major flooding occurred in the UK (during early 2014). About half of the participants in both groups strongly linked the floods to climate change, while a few expressed caution interpreting weather events such as these as evidence of a changing climate. Despite this, there was a strong sense that one ‘barrier’ to wider engagement with climate change was the lack of ‘signs’ of climate change (such as extreme weather) in the UK. A recurring theme across groups was that climate change needed to become more personally relevant to people’s lives in the UK:

“You have to make it relevant...it’s so far away, it’s a very difficult thing for people to grasp. If you make it more tangible and start at that community level...”

“It’s humanising it I guess and making sure it’s relevant.”

“When people don’t act on climate change, it’s because they don’t know how it affects their lives directly.”

“Except for natural disaster, it’s really quite hard to relate the impact of climate change to people’s life.”

When asked who (or which institutions) ought to be responsible for responding to climate change, a common response was that ‘everyone’ had a responsibility, but that Western (and wealthier) nations more than developing countries, and older people more than the young, should take more of the burden.

"Our parents would go on about turning the lights off because you're killing the polar bears. Their generation helped muck it up as well and they go on at our generation to deal with it so I think it should be more of a collective effort, more than that future generations should deal with it."

"Everyone is responsible but maybe not to the same degree. Those countries that have more resources such as the developed nations...they have more of a responsibility than those that don't have the resources."

As is common in surveys of public opinion, there was a feeling across both sets of groups that the government (more than individuals) should lead on society's response to climate change. However, this expectation was tempered by a widespread lack of trust in political parties, cynicism about the short-term goals of politicians and the sense that economic concerns were placed above environmental ones:

"The most frustrating thing for me is there's no leadership...at the end of the day when you have George Osborne in the budget, saying 'we're going to drill every last drop of oil out of the ground'...there's very little that our small acts can do. They're fairly meaningless if there's not that systematic change."

"They have a very big responsibility because people generally listen to politicians who are high up. So, if they're acting in a certain way then the rest of the country is going to listen."

"I think the government should take more care but it's not the priority, they prefer to work on the economy."

"There is always some other focus that politics has other than the climate. As soon as the politicians decide to do something then that's going to happen."

When asked what sort of policies the government should be pursuing to tackle climate change, support for (and investment in) renewable energy technologies was discussed by all groups. Yet, knowledge about specific policy options being pursued by the UK government was generally low:

“I’m not too aware really of the government’s policies in sort of sustainability/energy.”

“I know they’re trying to do stuff on carbon emissions, but I couldn’t tell you what.”

With the exception of those who had worked, studied or volunteered specifically in the climate change field, concepts such as a ‘carbon budget’ were unfamiliar to the majority of participants. Similarly, relatively few participants were aware of the reason why ‘2 degrees’ was an important number in climate change debates (the amount of global warming deemed ‘dangerous’, measured against pre-industrial averages). This is striking given the fact that both sets of groups contained people with an above-average level of interest in climate and that terms such as ‘2 degrees’ are in widespread use among campaigns aimed at the general public on climate change.

Talking about climate change

One group discussed linking climate change to the things that they (and their friends) cared about, as well as creating pride in community-level renewable energy projects:

“We have to make them care, see examples right on their doorstep, because that’s the only way it will hit home really.”

Mirroring previous research, most participants cited friends, family and scientists as more trusted sources on climate change (or any other issue) than politicians. With the exception of the BBC (which many participants identified as a reliable source of information on climate change), peer-networks using social media were considered more reliable than the mainstream media.

“I’d probably trust a scientist more than a politician just because being a scientist makes them seem more informed, almost cleverer in that specific subject, whereas a politician isn’t specialised in the subject they’re talking about. They could just be making a general statement. You trust a scientist a bit more because that’s their chosen field of expertise. Some journalists are just there to make money and write what they want because it sells.”

“Most of the news I trust comes from social networks. I know who it’s coming from and I trust them. For the news I’m trying to read many newspapers because I know there is a political party behind it so I try to be fair and get the information from everywhere.”

“I think it is the way our parents bring us up. Upbringing is a very important factor...Parents are the key influence.”

There were mixed views on whether climate change was something that young people tended to talk to each other about. For participants who had friends in environmentalist circles, the topic was common. But others suggested that talking about climate change was almost taboo:

“It’s like religion, it’s not something I really talk about... it seems like people don’t feel like talking about it.”

“If you start talking about it [climate change] people just lose interest straight away. They don’t want to know, they want to talk about something else.”

“Unless I’m with friends who are environmentally active, I would avoid bringing up environmental issues as it just creates this ‘other’; that I’m trying to change your mind.”

“Do I speak about the environment with everybody? I don’t because I’m really afraid they’re going to say the sentence that makes me really angry, ‘oh global warming, oh really, it’s really cold today.’ I don’t feel like talking to the people in this very clichéd, simplistic way. So it’s difficult to speak to people about that as you don’t want them to feel bad or yourself to feel bad about what they say.”

Going even further, several participants said it was ‘uncool’ to be “stigmatised” and put in the ‘green’ box, and that they avoided talking about climate change in most situations. However, this did not seem to be borne out of a fear of encountering sceptical views among peers, but rather a wish to avoid sounding ‘preachy’ or judgmental:

“It’s very difficult, very tricky to find a balance between telling somebody something so the person won’t feel that you’re trying to re-educate them. So you try to say it in a very normal way or a very funny way because you don’t want them to feel pressure.”

“I wouldn’t raise the topic. Then it sounds like I’m going to tell them you should do something about climate change. It would sound preachy.”

As a way of circumventing the awkwardness of climate change as a topic, one participant suggested using humour and a more light-hearted approach to break the ice, while another agreed that dramatically framing the issue should be avoided:

“I think we should use more humour or more light opinion and not have it as such a drama but something that could be cool.”

“I think the dramatisation of it turns a lot of people off. If it’s dramatic, there’s an undertone of oh you’re a bit stupid if you disagree with us. I think that can polemicise things.”

Some even suggested that slowly but surely the climate conversation is becoming easier:

“I think it’s something that’s getting progressively easier to do. It was definitely associated in the past with a niche, nerdy thing and it’s partially an age thing where it’s not really cool to care about things. It’s almost more embarrassing now not to understand climate change when people are talking about it and that definitely wasn’t the case 5 or so years ago. So I think in terms of actually broaching the discussion, it’s slightly easier.”

“I’m actually happy to be put in the green box. I’m proud to be the one using organic cosmetics and being the one who knows and the one people ask questions of. People can feel guilty around me sometimes. I’m not the model but I am putting forward the issue.”

In fact, across the focus groups, there was a sense of optimism that younger generations want to change things for the better, or (by being pushed to their limit) will be forced to, and that this will breed innovation. As one participant succinctly put it:

“We’ve got nothing to lose.”

THE NARRATIVES

In Phase 2, the four groups discussed four different ‘narratives’, derived from the discussion held in Phase 1 and existing literature on how young people engage with climate change.

Narrative 1: ‘The things we love’

‘Managing the risks of climate change can help to protect the things we love: whether that’s the local football team who’ve had their match cancelled again because of a flooded pitch, or keeping cities healthy and free from pollution. Climate change is happening here and now, but effective climate policy to cut emissions can do something about it.’

This narrative was strongly influenced by previous COIN work for the Climate Coalition.²⁴ Participants broadly liked the idea of using local, personal impacts of climate change:

“It makes the good point of trying to make the issue relevant to young people rather than just saying this is a global issue.”

“If people know it’s about protecting your things, protecting your future, your children, your home, your health, then it becomes personal as opposed to ‘oh there’s flooding in some other country, oh that’s a shame but what can I do?’ When it becomes about me then I switch on.”

There was recognition of what this narrative was aiming to do: make climate change relevant for disengaged audiences and describing the problem in a way that might appeal beyond the ‘usual suspects’. However, some couldn’t see the direct, causal link between climate change, flooded pitches and healthier cities and felt this should have been explained. The majority viewed the specific example of a flooded football pitch as too trivial, personally irrelevant and disconnected from the global character of

climate change, or – in the case of ‘healthier cities’ – too vague to identify as a climate change issue:

“Neither sound like much to worry about. It doesn’t sound like we need to act or do anything. It’s bringing it a lot closer to home but it’s trivializing it.”

This response was widespread across the groups, suggesting that while the notion of bringing climate change ‘closer to home’ is important and potentially powerful, there is a subtle balance to be struck between making climate change personally relevant and avoiding trivialising what is well-understood to be a complex global issue with no easy fixes among this audience.

The language around ‘managing climate risks’ was disliked by most. Some felt it conveyed a sense of powerlessness, in that *“the risks are going to be there whatever you do and the best you can do is manage them”*. Another participant commented that managing risks did not suggest urgency:

“Using the language of risk makes it sound like we’re just juggling a few small-scale things around to see if we can work it out, rather than, wait, we need to do something quite dramatic.”

While there is some evidence that the language of risk is a good way to communicate about climate change with policy makers, combining it with the word ‘management’ turned it into a phrase that was seen as bland, weak and un-motivating. Using an alternative phrase (such as ‘preventing the dangerous risks of climate change’) might have produced a different reaction from the groups, but the findings suggest that risk language is not – in itself – an intuitively appealing prospect for young people.

Similarly, ‘effective climate policy’ was seen as vague, ‘empty’ political jargon (although it was preferred to the use of ‘ambitious policy’ in the second narrative, as something more concrete and suggestive that the policy might actually work). Participants across the groups reported that they would have preferred more specific, detailed actions to aim for with timelines and a link to what they personally could do:

“The first thing that jumped out at me was ‘effective climate policy’. What is that? What should be effective climate policy that can help us with cutting emissions? It needs to be more specific.”

Overall, the narrative was viewed as lacking in a sense of urgency and not suggestive of any particular actions.

Narrative 2: ‘Consensus & misinformation’

‘97% of scientists agree that humans are causing climate change and that countries like the UK will be affected. And surveys show time and time again that the majority of Britons are concerned about climate change and expect decision-makers to take strong action. It’s time to cut through all the misinformation in the media and see this consensus reflected in more ambitious climate policy.’

There was broad acknowledgement from participants that communicating such a strong level of consensus among scientists was – in principle – a persuasive approach. Being in possession of these kinds of arguments was seen as motivating on a personal level for many people:

“It gives you the scientific backing, the fact that everyone’s concerned about it and how we could start to make a change. I like the use of the statistic as you can use that for personal use as well as just chatting about it.”

Several participants felt that such strong factual arguments would shock and surprise people currently disengaged by the issue and even compel them to action. However, critical to its persuasiveness was some sense of who the source providing the information was, and whether they were trusted and unbiased. There was also a recognition that people don’t generally respond well to facts and figures:

“I think the whole tone of it is quite aggressive and preachy...People might turn away from it. It might have that kind of effect.”

Some people suggested that the specific ‘97%’ figure somewhat begged the question of what the ‘other 3%’ thought; and that such statistical wrangling was in danger of distracting from the bigger picture, which should concentrate on solutions. There was significant empathy with the idea that there is widespread misinformation in the media, with participants who had a background in climate change particularly highlighting the tendency towards ‘false balance’ (whereby the media present a ‘debate’ between scientists and sceptical voices, which fails to faithfully reflect the minority status of sceptics). However, overall interest in the sceptic debate was very low.

Echoing previous COIN research,²⁵ the notion of a ‘concerned majority’ was dismissed by many participants as not reflecting reality:

“I don’t think that people care as much as this would like to suggest. I think the disconnect between reality and that statement would make people trust it less. It will strengthen the idea that environmentalists are exaggerating.”

Overall, this narrative was viewed as more solution-oriented than the first, with the notion of ‘taking on’ the misinformation in the media identified as a motivational aspect of the narrative. However, similarly to Narrative 1, it was felt to be lacking in tangible suggestions for action, with the phrase ‘ambitious climate policy’ described again as vague, generic and unachievable. Comments included:

“It doesn’t mean anything to me. I just want specifics. I want to know what needs changing. What about our current situation? What would climate policy involve? Are we talking about concrete measures for less emissions? My personal preference is for quite strong language and this isn’t satisfactory. This isn’t something that’s really been on the radar sufficiently before and I don’t know what we’re comparing it to. I just want something that is a little more go, go, go.”

“Ambitious means it’s not possible. But let’s try a little harder.”

Overall, this narrative highlighted a strong appetite among the audience for a specific ‘ask’ in a message and clear direction on what people can practically do, whether it’s calling on politicians to make climate mitigation an election issue or supporting a particular mitigation policy.

Narrative 3: ‘Climate change is here and now’

‘Climate change isn’t a problem for the future, it’s happening now. Current generations are going to have to live with its consequences but are also the ones who can take the lead in getting to grips with it. We need to decarbonise the economy, starting with the power sector, and keep global temperatures within the ‘2 degrees’ target to avoid the worst consequences of climate change.’

The third narrative was the most popular among participants. The idea that climate change was a problem for ‘now’ resonated well with the majority of participants. In comparison to the other three narratives, it was seen as inclusive, specific in terms of the actions that people could take, addressed the problem at scale and communicated a strong sense of urgency:

“You’re saying decarbonise the economy but you’re going even further than that and saying start with the power sector. To me that’s much more tangible. OK, this is what we need to do. It doesn’t tell me how I can do it but there’s a trajectory there rather than just climate policy.”

However, the majority of participants were unfamiliar with the concept of ‘2 degrees’ and didn’t understand exactly what ‘decarbonising the economy’ entailed. Many felt that this technical language would only appeal to a well-informed audience:

“This is for people who know, or are concerned about climate change already, and want to know what they can do about it.”

Alternative terms that might be better understood by a general audience than ‘decarbonising the economy’ were suggested, including “cutting carbon”, “using more alternative energy”, “low-carbon economy”, and “an economy less dependent on fossil fuels”.

In addition, although this narrative was viewed as offering the most tangible actions of the four, it could have gone further:

“You’d want to know how they’re going to decarbonise the economy. There are some ways to do that that are better than others – for example renewables over nuclear.”

“We need more concrete examples of how to get to the 2 degrees target.”

Narrative 3 confirms the need for messaging that includes clear and tangible actions people can engage with and that conveys a sense of urgency by emphasising the immediacy and proximity of climate impacts.

Narrative 4: ‘Climate change is a moral issue’

‘It’s not fair that the people who face the worst effects of climate change will be poor people in vulnerable areas of the world. But the UK will be affected too – whether that’s extreme rainfall or changes to the foods available in our shops. It’s our moral duty to support our decision-makers in reducing the risks of climate change through effective climate policy.’

The final narrative produced a mixed response from participants. While some felt that it resonated with them, many doubted whether it would motivate people more widely across society. In common with the other narratives (except Narrative 3), it was not viewed as sufficiently hard-hitting or solution-oriented and was perceived as lacking in concrete actions to take. No one liked the juxtaposition of climate impacts on poor people in vulnerable parts of the world with comparatively trivial UK changes to rainfall and available foods:

“I love the way they talk about poor people and then say let’s just talk about the UK now. Oh the poor people, you know what, who gives a damn? Let’s talk about the UK. Make them both important.”

”I just don’t like the whole us and them about it. I think there’s too much of that in everyday life and it stops people from taking action.”

“Maybe you should say climate change does not only affect poor people, it affects everyone. How does it affect you?” And then call them out.”

Very few liked the appeal to moral duty, with several participants commenting that no one likes to be ‘preached at’ and that arguments based on guilt are unlikely to be persuasive or empowering. In particular, the ‘it’s not fair’ phrase was felt to be whingey in tone, and hardly anyone felt a moral duty to support decision makers. Rather, the onus was on challenging them for doing nothing or acting against the interests of a low-carbon agenda:

“I think that collusion with the government assumes a level of trust and belief in politics that just doesn’t exist. It would be better to say it’s our moral duty to challenge our government because the popular perception is that they’re money grabbing, self-interested, in the pockets of business. I think that antagonism would work better than support.”

Participants’ lack of trust in the wider moral compunctions of society and the ineffectiveness of preachy, guilt-laden messaging for motivating people over the long-term suggests that an appeal to moral duty should be avoided. There was a strong call for decision-makers to be challenged and the interconnectedness of our world to be stressed over comparisons and distinctions between the developed and developing world.

Writing a new narrative

The final section of the narrative workshops offered a chance for participants to write their own narrative – either something entirely new, or by combining sections or phrases from the previous narratives they liked best. The results were illuminating, providing a clear indication of the common features in the narratives that were popular and those that were less supported.

The concept that received the most support was that climate change was happening ‘here and now’ and that it affected ‘everyone’. This formed a part of many individuals’ narratives, with participants emphasising that this was a problem for the current generation, not for the future. The immediacy of this framing, coupled with the

relevance for a young audience in particular, attracted widespread support. Many participants also focused on ways of making climate change relevant to people's everyday lives – either through the mention of impacts such as flooding, or by invoking the principles of protecting the 'things people love'.

About a third of participants used the '97% consensus' statistic. Interestingly, it was often combined with the idea that 'everyone will be affected', suggesting that the important aspect of the scientific consensus is not that it is *happening*, but that it has consequences.

Another common theme was a desire for clear instructions about what to do next. Some participants drew on the most specific instructions in the four narratives they evaluated (to decarbonize the power sector), but most did not actually propose concrete, tangible actions themselves. This suggests it is hard for people to intuitively grasp what sort of actions someone should take (beyond behavioural changes) and that messages that seek to compel action in an audience should be specific in what they 'ask' for. In other words, young people need to know what policy change is needed, how to support its progress and how to challenge policy that stands in the way of a sustainable, pro-climate agenda.

Below is a selection of narratives that participants proposed:

Climate change is REAL. It affects you! What are you going to do about it?

Climate change is relevant and happening now. We need to stand up and make change. The more you do, the quicker this will no longer be a problem but a solution. This affects your jobs, homes, power, lifestyle.

Climate change is everyone's problem. It demands immediate transformation of the way we live. From the bottom up. And responsible, effective policies from our representative governments on clean energy, independence, smart technology and innovation in the sustainability agenda, by people like you.

97% of scientists agree that climate change isn't just a problem for the future – it's happening here and now. Our current generation needs to support effective climate policy to lower our carbon footprint and protect those we love from the risks of climate change.

The effects of climate change on your daily life are more significant than you think. The flooding in your back yard, the changing food prices in the local market and so on. And it will become more extreme with the temperature increase. Take action now to reduce the global emissions. Talk to your local authority to see what you can do for a more sustainable future.

THE CONCLUSIONS

Young people are in a unique position as they face the reality of a changing climate: potentially they are best-placed to push for and define the long-term societal response to climate change, yet they're also the most vulnerable to the legacy of decisions made by older generations. Although young adults have potentially the most to gain *and* the most to lose in a changing climate, their voices are not prominent, and engagement with climate change among this crucial demographic is in many ways quite limited. While some studies have captured young people's views about climate change, very few have attempted to explore the ways in which young adults could be more effectively engaged. The findings in this report provide valuable lessons for communicating with young people about climate change. While some of these follow from existing research, others challenge conventional wisdom, underscoring the crucial importance of audience research in developing strategies for climate change communication.

Our findings show that young people are highly cynical about mainstream politics and do not feel well represented by political parties, with a significant number feeling that voting is futile. However, they are motivated by political issues that affect them, including climate change. Young people are frustrated by the portrayal of climate change as an abstract and distant concern that has difficulty competing with seemingly more pressing issues like fighting for jobs and the cost of education. Few expressed trust in either politicians or the media to provide accurate (or inspiring) information about climate change: friends and family (and to a lesser extent not-for-profit organisations) were seen as more trustworthy voices. In line with much previous work, participants in this project expressed a strong dislike and desire to disassociate themselves from the 'preachyness' of typical environmental communication.

There was a clear preference for the immediacy and relevance of a narrative that frames climate change as an issue for the 'here and now' (e.g., Narrative 3). For a generation who will likely face the most significant impacts of climate change if urgent action is not taken, the idea of moving climate change from a future to a present day concern was appealing. Clear actions, such as decarbonising the power sector as an important first step, were also welcomed by participants, who preferred

direction and a focus on solutions. In particular, phrases like ‘ambitious climate policy’ and ‘managing the risks of climate change’ were universally disliked, and were not considered to be empowering or motivating.

The concept of linking climate change to people’s everyday personal lives through talking about the ‘things we love’ was strongly supported, but Narrative 1, which employed this, received a mixed reception. Many did not like the specific examples chosen, suggesting that the ‘devil is in the detail’ with this kind of approach and that any specific examples should be drawn from the audience itself (i.e., ‘what do *you* love?’), or carefully tested with the intended audience first. There is a subtle balance to strike between making climate change personally relevant and rendering it trivial through examples that do not reflect the global character of the issue.

The majority found consensus messages (as adopted in Narrative 2) to be powerful and hard-hitting. These featured strongly in participants’ own narratives, but were typically combined with an additional clause: that scientists agreed everyone would be affected, or that scientists agreed the impacts would be serious and that action was required. This distinction seems important as typically the ‘97%’ statistic is used to illustrate the consensus that humans are causing climate change (and used to combat sceptics’ arguments to the contrary), but in their own narratives participants used it as a rallying call to present a case for action. To the extent that sceptical discourse does not seem to feature heavily in young people’s views about climate change, this suggests that fighting a battle against misinformation may only have limited appeal.

At the same time, although sceptical arguments were not often referred to, there was doubt that a ‘concerned majority’ of the public really existed on climate change (despite the fact that opinion polls show that there really is one). Perhaps reflecting a distaste for ‘preachy’ language and messages, framings identifying a moral duty to tackle climate change (e.g. Narrative 4) were widely disliked.

The findings from this report pose a challenge to some commonly used advocacy tactics. Fighting against organised scepticism, while important, is not something that many young people are interested in or motivated by. And some popular phrases (such as the need for ‘more ambitious climate policy’ to ‘manage the risks’ of ‘2 degrees’ of climate change) were either unfamiliar or perceived as uninspiring among the participants in this research. But the findings also offer an opportunity to

communicate more effectively with this crucial demographic. The insights that the ‘young voices’ in this report provide are invaluable for designing communications programmes that can deepen engagement on climate change, ensuring that future campaigns are grounded in the best audience-specific research. The findings also suggest the narrative approaches that are more likely to resonate with the interests and values of young people. We leave the final word to one of our participants:

“I’m pretty hopeful about the future. I cannot picture or imagine that the earth is going to be wrecked. I believe in humanity.”

ENDNOTES

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