COMMUNICATING BEYOND THE CHOIR
PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING, DENIAL, AND CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION

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CLIMATE CHANGE: THE HUGE, HOT ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM
Katherine Hayhoe

- Climate Scientist
- Evangelical Christian
- Extensive body of work communicating about climate change beyond the choir

Yale Program on Climate Change Communication

- Psychologists and social scientists at Yale and George Mason working together to study the best practices for climate change communication
- Numerous guides and materials for communicating about climate change
CONCERNS IN THE U.S.

- Environment and climate change have consistently ranked very low among American's Levels of Concern about National Problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The availability and affordability of healthcare</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The economy</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The possibility of future terrorist attacks in the U.S.</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Social Security system</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The size and power of the federal government</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The way income and wealth are distributed in the U.S.</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hunger and homelessness</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crime and violence</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal immigration</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drug use</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>37%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The quality of the environment</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The availability and affordability of energy</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial relations</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Climate change</td>
<td>25%</td>
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</tbody>
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American’s Levels of Concern about National Problems

March 5-8, 2015

GALLUP
HOW DO WE CHANGE THIS?

First we have to understand why

– What do people understand?
– Why is there denial?
– Why is it political?
PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING: What matters?

1. SCIENCE:
   - Frequently confuse climate change and other environmental issues — most often with the hole in the ozone layer
   - Frequently confuse "weather" and "climate"

2. CONSensus:
   - Public tends to underestimate the scientific consensus on climate change

Cook et. al 2016

HELP CLOSE THE CONSENSUS GAP

THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

45%

THINK THERE IS SCIENTIFIC AGREEMENT ON GLOBAL WARMING

THE SCIENTIFIC AGREEMENT

97%

OF CLIMATE SCIENTISTS ACTUALLY AGREE ON GLOBAL WARMING

TheConsensusProject.com
3. URGENCY and CONSEQUENCES: People tend to believe climate change will happen far into the future and far away (and perhaps not even to humans)

4. ACTIONS: Feelings that the problem is too big to solve, that they aren’t effective or can’t do anything

• Or: Feeling like they already do their part (“I recycle! I don’t have to worry!”)
IS THERE STILL DENIAL?

• Increasing number of Americans believe that climate change is happening
• Fewer believe that it is caused by human activity
• Opinion varies by location
WHY IS THERE STILL DENIAL?

Psychologically, climate change is the perfect storm for denial

We tend to:
- Think short term (immediate survival)
- Assess catastrophes (even rare ones) as riskier long-term problems
- Be tribal/social and value tribal conformity
- Be resistant to change

Climate change ticks all of the boxes for lack of concern or denial
WHY IS THEIR STILL DENIAL?

There are two types of denial: Active and Passive

• We employ psychological “tools” to preserve our beliefs
  • Confirmation bias

• Tribalism – people stick to beliefs of their ”tribe” (family, religion, ideology) in order to not be ostracized
  • Loyalty over truth

When people say climate change isn't happening because it's snowing where they are...

THE SHIP CAN'T BE SINKING

MY END JUST ROSE 200 FEET
WHY IS IT SO POLITICAL?

Climate Change Threat Perception by Party

Democrats

Republicans

Everyone

Huxster, Carmichael, and Brulle 2015
Estimated % of adults who discuss global warming at least occasionally, 2016.
SO HOW DO WE TALK ABOUT IT?

Who should we talk to?

How do we make people care?

And what is most important to communicate?
SPECTRUM OF CLIMATE CHANGE OPINION IN THE US

• We tend overestimate how many people disagree with us
• “Six Americas” – Yale Program on Climate Change Communication

![Diagram showing the spectrum of climate change opinion in the US]

- Alarmed: 17%
- Concerned: 28%
- Cautious: 27%
- Disengaged: 7%
- Doubtful: 11%
- Dismissive: 10%

Alarmed + Concerned + Cautious + Disengaged = 79%

Gieger and Swim 2016
GETTING READY TO TALK CLIMATE

• Think of a person you want to (or are afraid to) talk to about climate change
  – YOU CAN TALK TO ANYONE –
  But your strategies and end goals will differ

• SET A GOAL – What are you trying to achieve in this conversation?

Why set a goal??
• Helps YOU start the conversation
• Helps you stay focused

Remember you don’t have to “win”
WHAT DOESN’T WORK?

• Complicated scientific information, statistics, numbers, jargon

• Very very sad, emotional pleas → We all have a “finite pool of worry” and continued emotional appeals can lead to “emotional numbing”
  – Related: apocalyptic pleas

• Talking about things happening far away or far in the future (at least to start)

• Yelling, getting angry, fighting → leads to stronger entrenchment
4 COMMUNICATION STEPS:

1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
2. GET THEIR ATTENTION
3. ADDRESS THEIR UNDERSTANDING (Sometimes)
4. EMPOWER THEM TO ACT
STEP 1: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

What is important to them in life?

Which “America” are they?

What do they know about climate change?
STEP 2: GET THEIR ATTENTION

Framing - finding the angle that gets their attention

• Set the issue as close to home, now, and near term
• Focus on an issue that is resonant for that person’s interests, sub-group, affiliations, occupation, religion, etc.
  – i.e. impact on skiing or hunting, impact on economics, impact on healthcare, stewardship of the earth
  – Just be careful not to zone in so far that they lose sight of big picture

START YOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH A “GRAIN OF TRUTH”
STEP 3: ADDRESS THEIR UNDERSTANDING
(without making them feel dumb)

- Save science for the curious, confused, concerned
  - For the most dismissive SCIENCE (sadly) DOESN’T MATTER

- KEEP SCIENCE SIMPLE
  - Avoid jargon
  - Directly address misconceptions (i.e. Ozone vs Climate change)
  - Metaphors are effective

- May need to avoid buzzwords
  - ex: say “heat-trapping gases” instead of “greenhouse gases”
STEP 4: EMPOWER THEM TO ACT
(without too much guilt)

• EMPHASIZE EFFECTIVE ACTION
  – People are most likely to act and feel concern when they feel empowered to do something
  – Explain personal actions they can take
  – Warn them of the single action bias - (aka taking one action like recycling and thinking they are off the hook now)

• Harness the power of SOCIAL NORMS
  – We are more likely to act if others are acting

• Remind them to take social and political action

• Encourage them to talk with others
FINAL POINTERS FOR YOU

• Don’t pressure yourself to get it all correct
  – You don’t have to “win” every conversation
  – KNOW WHEN TO EXIT GRACEFULLY

• Don’t forget those “grains of truth!”

Hey!
YOU CAN DO IT!
Climate Change CANNOT be a taboo subject

TALKING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IS ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE
THANK YOU!

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Additional resources:
Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (YPCCC)
http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/

Katherine Hayhoe
http://katharinehayhoe.com

Guide to the Psychology of Climate Change Communication
http://guide.cred.columbia.edu/

Books I recommend:

What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming – Per Espen Stoknes (Book)

Merchants of Doubt – Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway
Sample conversation starters:
- I’ve been thinking about climate change a lot recently. Do you ever worry about it?
- I just learned that 97% of climate scientists say that climate change is caused by us! Did you know that?
- Do you ever worry about what sea level rise will do to our city? It’s something I’ve been thinking about lately.

CLIMATE CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

- KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
- GRAIN OF TRUTH
- FRAME MESSAGES – LOCAL AND OF PERSONAL INTEREST/CONCERN
- CONSENSUS FRAMING
- KEEP SCIENCE SIMPLE
- ADDRESS MISCONCEPTIONS DIRECTLY
- EMPOWER FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION
- APPEAL TO SOCIAL NORMS