DISRUPT DISRUPTION

Thought experiment, inclusive climate communication

As it looked on Wed Jan 11 2017

[For most people, climate disruption is a scientific reality, but not yet a social one. New conversations about climate disruption are therefore needed. Inspired by the latest climate communications research, this resource suggests new conversation starters and provides exemples of old ones that need to be replaced.]

The general public's support for climate action continues to be limited. In spite of climate disruption affecting everybody, the issue is still strongly associated with the political left. And when it comes to adequate political ambition, its entrance into the corridors of power – to the extent this has happened – has so far been insufficient. One of the underlying reasons for this is how climate disruption has been communicated, not least its being lumped together with less complicated problems and therefore came to be understood as an environmental issue among others (with relatively simple solutions). Thankfully, the issue's communication is much simpler to change than its other aspects.

Communicators have spoken extensively about climate disruption over the last 30 years – but how? The way a phenomenon is framed matters greatly – not because there are words or arguments that magically make you a winner in the noisy public debate (and that it is enough to use this as cosmeticts on otherwise identical arguments), but because some ways of starting a conversation or telling a story have a larger chance than others of making the discussion meaningful and sustained. Moreover, the degree of openness towards the audience's diversity in terms of backgrounds, needs, and preferred communication channels also matters. Achieving inclusive communication in light of the climate issue's unique scope and complexity has been difficult, however, both because the science of climate communication has been undeveloped and because communicators haven't sufficiently embraced general insights from communication science. The obvious polarization in itself as well

as a large volume of research show that many mistakes have been made – which translates into lots of lost time.

So where would the counteraction of and response to climate disruption be today if communicators had worked more inclusively from the outset, actively trying to build broad networks of engagement? This is the question asked by the following thought experiment, which is informed and inspired by the latest research.

Help with translating the page into other languages would be highly welcome (and saliently credited) – just contact me to get started.

See the bottom of the page for a selection of this research as well as a wrap-up, a checklist based on the thought experiment, a PDF version, the opportunity to comment (please do!) as well as a logg. The thought experiment was created with a global audience, and the main ideological leanings, in mind.

The resource's 70 comparisons are organized in the following way:

Problem redefinition (12 comparisons)

Understanding of magnitude and complexity

Focus of overarching solution types

More suitable stories (20 comparisons)

No hardships without possibilities

Welcome debate

Pep

Avoid landing in extremes

Heart and/or brain (8 comparisons)

Both

Diversity of feelings and values

The right psychological distance (14 comparisons)

Don't tell people what to think

Directly relevant

The now's relationship to the future

Clear and simple to understand (16 comparisons)

Skip scientific jargon

Avoid interpretation pitfalls

Would climate
communicators
have fared better if

they had talked
about climate
disruption like this?

Problem redefinition

Understanding of magnitude and complexity

Comparison 1

A civilizational problem to do both with the natural and social sciences

...rather than...

An environmental problem to do with the natural sciences

Comparison 2

A set of connected and border-crossing socio-economic, philosophical-ethical and technological problems

...rather than...

Another in the row of national policy dilemmas that can be debated one expert/politician versus another

Comparison 3

A scientific field and a societal task – a political problem – in which counteraction, response and preparedness need to be discussed

...rather than...

A natural phenomenon the existence of which is to be defended, including on the political level

Comparison 4

A multi-layered, unique problem that lacks simple, straightforward solutions

...rather than...

A problem that can be counteracted by being inspired by earlier successes concerning agreements about disarmament, the ozone layer or acid rain

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 5

A trend that loads the extreme weather dice, i.e. increases the probability for birth and high intensity in a measurable way

...snarare än...

A trend to which individual extreme weather events can never be directly tied

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 6

A steroid injection to existing vulnerabilities to natural weather and climate extremes, which need to be responded to and prepared against already as it is

...snarare än...

An entirely new, exotic problem

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 7

A scourge meaning that *average* temperatures risk rising with X degrees – i.e. much more in some places and somewhat less in other

A scourge meaning that average temperatures risk rising with X degrees

Also holds for sea level rise, which due to gravitational differences and wind patterns will vary regionally.

Comparison 8

...rather than...

Something to protect people's future plans, animals' and plants' prerequisites to thrive, the quality of elderly care, healthcare etc. from*

Something to save the planet/the climate from**

To talk about less talked-about potential impacts can lead to curiosity, increased understanding and renewed energy to get engaged.

*** Relatively abstract and cliché.***

Focus of overarching solution types

Comparison 9

...rather than...

A mining and drilling problem

An emissions problem*

a framing which is made worse by how the pollution in question consists of invisible, odor-less gases

Comparison 10

A problem that demands two interconnected work paths: one that counteracts climate disruption and one that responds to and prepares against it

...rather than...

A problem that should only be prevented and counteracted

A problem puzzle that demands many different types of solutions, of which many require strong collective efforts

...rather than...

A problem the solutions of which begin with recycling and energy-efficient light bulbs*

*This can lead both to engagement-destroying cognitive dissonance, i.e. that thoughts, emotions and actions don't match (because how can this be the right ambition level for a problem this serious?), and to so-called 'single-action bias'/'moral licensing', a phenomenon by which people justify their bad actions with how they did a good thing in some other setting.

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

As requiring one to consume certain goods less frequently – but with all the more pleasure and luxuriousness (e.g. 'Saturday meat')*

...snarare än...

As requiring one to consume certain goods somewhat less frequently (e.g. 'Meatfree Monday')**

*Positive associations, makes one's mouth water, puts in place a hich anchor

**Forcible and limiting associations, negatively charged, puts in place a low anchor.

More suitable stories

No hardships without possibilities

Comparison 13

A multifaceted opportunity to insure society against a big risk, by creating robustness to external shocks, and simulaneously realize several bonuses

...rather than...

A perfect, apocalyptic storm that inevitably will lead to net losses*

Self-fulfilling, overly fear-inducing, leading to hopelessness due to perceived lack of self-efficacy.

Comparison 14

A source of technological, scientific and social innovation imaginable in the shape of transformative visions for the future – e.g. as a new industrial revolution

...rather than...

An unfortunate consequence of the status quo which is to be dealt with through small adjustments of the latter

Comparison 15

A challenge in which action decreases the burdens placed upon today's and tomorrow's people and also brings many co-benefits*

...rather than...

A challenge that forces people to choose between keeping their welfare and their fun on the one hand and to make sacrifices for the climate on the other

An opportunity – in the form of one of humanity's most important choices ever – to transition air from polluted to clean; water from poisonous to life-giving; energy from undemocratic and distant to democratic and local; economies from fossil to and lagging behind to top-modern and leading in competitiveness; semi-qualified labor markets from sensitive to the global dynamics to enjoying robust jobs necessary for counteraction, response and preparation; flora and fauna extinction to mutually beneficial thriving; forests from clear-cut to blossoming; careless shop'n'drop practices to circular eliminations of waste; car cities to human cities; extreme inequalities to improved resource sharing; downwards societal cohesiveness to upwards pride in one's community; and international struggles to international cooperation.

Comparison 16

A quandary in which probabilities can be looked at positively ("Action now can limit the likelihood of [...] to 20 %")

...rather than...

A quandary in which probabilities are exclusively looked at in a negative manner ("If we don't act now, the likelihood of [...] is 80 %")

Comparison 17

A side effect of the fossil fuel age – which, it should be remembered, has brought much good, including much knowledge to utilize further

...rather than...

A consequence that our oil and coal curses – which should never have been awoken – has given rise to

Comparison 18

A difficulty in which action now, however, can achieve a larger chance of avoiding present and future losses – as well as remedy past degradations*

...rather than...

A difficulty that however also brings possibilities for realizing present and future gains and improvements**

*All of this is an attempt to combine loss and gain framing, since a very large degree of context dependency makes it hard to say which one works best even in a given situation Inspiration, p. 10].

** This is good and important but could, then, perhaps be made even better by mentioning both losses and wins – and by connecting them in a coherent argument.

Welcome debate

Comparison 19

An overarching area of politics that demands a one-hundred percent honest and serious debate

...rather than...

An overarching area of politics that demands one-hundred percent consensus regarding solutions

Comparison 20

An issue in which there is a difference between being worried and accepting the prescribed solutions

...rather than...

An issue in which being worried means that one has to agree with a certain political movement's politics

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 21

An all-important civilizational choice to talk *with* people about

...snarare än...

An all-important civilizational choice to talk *to* people about

Comparison 22

Something to describe, yes, but also something in need of everyday – and philosophical – exchanges of stories and interpretations through dialogue and discussion*

...rather than...

A problem where engagement and solutions naturally follow upon – and are directly proportionate to – facts and predictions

* [Go to guide about why some people are still unconvinced regarding various aspects of climate disruption]

Comparison 23

A challenge requiring a positive vision, e.g. building X solar-cell factories/year, reaching a certain degree of circular economy, or 'racing to zero [fossil fuels]'

...rather than...

A challenge that requires decreased emissions and reduced growth (in the linear, ownership-focused economy)*

Reductions are much less enthusing and human-friendly than increases.

Comparison 24

An engagement to be proud of and feel good about, since one performs a great service and is thought of as a good and respectable person

...rather than...

An engagement that one has to be prepared to sacrifice much for, especially fun stuff

Including through the hipness of solar panels and electric cars. Duly note, however, that there is a risk associated with emphasizing personal status – a self-focused, extrinsic value – overly much since foing so under certain circumstances can produce decreased long-term engagement. More about this below. If climate disruption's impacts have been previously referred to, even more care should be taken with invoking distinctiveness, since people in frightened states of mind tend to be more open to messages that instead focuses on the collective [Source, p. 74–75].

Comparison 25

A collective threat that we all need to counteract, respond to and prepare against – together, with strong support structures

...rather than...

A threat that you should be engaged in since it's your fault*

Shame and guild seldom lead to engagement.

Comparison 26

An imminent danger to security, freedom, autonomy, social cohesiveness and societal institutions

An imminent danger to the wallet

Avoid landing in extremes

Comparison 27

...rather than...

A difficult puzzle in which taking the threat seriously is what's realistic; the status quo is what's radical

A difficult puzzle the solutions for which are radical and unrealistic

Comparison 28

...rather than...

A constantly ongoing active choice between a reasonable survival strategy and a shortsighted marginally raised standard of living

A choice – to make once and for all – about whether to become a climate hero

Comparison 29

...rather than...

A reason to try to tread lightly on Earth by acting (climate) friendly and (climate) courteously towards one's peers and surroundings

A reason to think green, shop green, live green*

*An often apt shortcut that comes with powerful political connotations, however.

Comparison 30

A threat that knowingly malicious parties have made worse by pusposefully sowing false doubt and burying knowledge

...rather than...

A threat the origin of which – the enemy – is everyone who works in the fossil fuel industry*

alternatively to which there is no enemy, since we are all complicit.

Comparison 31

A factor that together with non-climate-related factors such as conflicts and policies affects migration patterns, especially domestically and short-distance*

...rather than...

A question we should deal with unless we want uncontrolled international migration and massive refugee waves**

[Source 1] [Source 2]

** *Fear-based appeal that risks activating defensive mechanisms and/or values non-helpful to deal with climate disruption overall.*

Comparison 32

An unfortunate side effect – of mainly welcome progress – the solutions to which are both bottom-up and top-down, including smarter government

...rather than...

A market failure that must be corrected by increased governmental steering

Heart and/or brain

Both

Comparison 33

A domain in which the proponents for action make as much room for emotions as for rational thinking

...rather than...

An optimization problem

Comparison 34

A cognitive trap that needs to be addressed both via the brains automatic, fast system* and its reflective, slow system

...rather than...

A puzzle that can be solved simply by pouring more facts onto people

* [Go to the world-leading nudge database]

Comparison 35

A distress with a large moral* component that has to be considered: people want to do what *they* think is right

...rather than...

A crux where action or non-action is best decided by applying a strictly economic cost-benefit analysis

E.g. in the form of conservative arguments about loyalty towards one's in-group, stewardship of the sacred nature and to decrease resource waste; liberal arguments about decreasing harm everywhere and to fight injustices; the legacy one leaves behind; peaceful patriotism; or taking responsibility. [Go to master's thesis, p. 14] Overall, emphasizing the need for a more benevolent, caring community.

Comparison 36

An often elusive force that requires statistics and global narratives to be understood – but also (simple) human stories with characters one can identify with

...rather than...

An obviously urgent complication – don't you see these figures and these large-scale changes?

Diversity of feelings and values

Comparison 37

A challenge that works with the whole emotional palette – sympathy, fear, sorrow, joy, anger, purposefulness – and thus needs suitable support/ celebration structures

...rather than...

A predicament to be terrified of

Comparison 38

A question that our intrinsic, self-transcendent values (helpfulness, being one with nature, altruism, justice etc.) demand action in*

...rather than...

A field in which incentives and appeals to extrinsic, self-focused values (wealth, status, hierarchy) motivates action**

* Perhaps economic development for the whole community/country/world, depending on the given person cares most about, can also be included here. So not economic gain for oneself but rather for the collective, and not for the sake of it but for security, freedom and for the sake of diverse interests and passions.

** There is research to suggest that a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic values mightn't fare better than appealing only to intrinsic values – and that it can be more fruitful to focus only on intrinsic values even in addressing recipients with extrinsically oriented personalities. [Source]

Comparison 39

An existential threat that we need to face head on with courage, eyes open, and tools ready and with support from honest and balanced news reporting

...rather than...

A threat, yes, but not really – as soon as we get to it will be alright*

Real hope is not about erasing all fear and all doubt or to trivialize the challenge by painting an overly positive image.

Comparison 40

A problem to illuminate with authentic images of relatable, solutions-oriented people acting to address the large-scale causes*

...rather than...

A problem forever associated with the same images: polar bears, belching chimneys and burning globes

* [Go to the Climate Visuals project]

The right psychological distance

[Go to guide about managing the psychological distance of climate disruption]

Don't tell people what to think

Comparison 41

A context-dependent predicament that requires understanding of how ideology, worldview, group belonging and demography always color perceptions*

...rather than...

A predicament so large and universal that one message should suit everyone

* which also means than no single messenger suits everyone. It is considerably more likely that a message works if the messenger is someone including a grasstops leader (a leader for grassroots organizations) – that enjoys trust in the group in question.

Comparison 42

A field in which every scale holds meaningful ways for politicians, institutions, enterprise and individuals to act – not least in level-transcending cooperation*

...rather than...

A responsibility for politicians/consumers

* That people feel that themselves can act meaningfully in the issue is critically important.

Comparison 43

A concern with powerful individual- and group-specific logics but still with a shared group- and border-transcending goal

...rather than...

A concern in lack of target audiences beyond an undefined 'we'*

* Who is 'we'? It is very broad and can often be interpreted as someone trying to speak for people without their permission, which risks alienating large parts of the population.

Comparison 44

A hard blow to people's perceived relationship with nature, showing the need for carefulness, honest reflection and humbleness before the difficulty of the challenge

...rather than...

A hard blow against people's perceived relationship with nature, yes, but that doesn't mean that there is space for weaknesses (e.g. 'It could be that...')

Comparison 45

A hard-to-swallow problem complex that some are still not convinced exists, which must be respected and addressed*

...rather than...

A simple and obvious truth that some still deny** or are skeptical about***

* [Go to guide about why some people are still unconvinced regarding various aspects of climate disruption]

** Judgmental and polarizing. Should be reserved for the organized time thieves, those who consciously sow false doubt.

*** A trait that actually characterizes sound scientific practice but which unfortunately has been hijacked by the organized delayers.

Directly relevant

Comparison 46

A dangerous mess that collectively needs to be sorted in order to protect those that people care about and are responsible for, both in terms of life and life quality

...rather than...

A dangerous mess we need to disentangle in order to protect people (or animals) far away that we will never meet

Comparison 47

A risk enhancer that makes life less secure and predictable when it comes to things the recipient is passionate about*

...rather than...

A risk multiplier for everything in front of one's nose**

* Why does the listener need to place climate disruption in its 'pool of worry'?

** 'Personalization' is a more fruitful way of thinking when it comes to managing climate disruption's psychological distance than what simple localization is. Moreover, localization of a message can be more important for boosting response to/preparation against climate disruption than for boosting counteraction to it.

[Go to guide about managing the psychological distance of climate disruption]

...rather than...

A local as well as global societal negotiation than in each iteration puts highly level-specific consequences on the table

The only part of the societal negotiation that concerns largely geographically unspecified consequences

Comparison 49

...rather than...

A trouble in constant need of communication, since it will be constantly present

A trouble to focus on in the wake of extreme weather events and during large international meetings

Comparison 50

...rather than...

A web of large and smaller consequences: from forest fires that create fire-spreading thunder to salt-polluted wells and lack of snowman snow*

A set of apocalyptic consequences: catastrophic threshold effects, collapsed ice sheets, disappeared coastlines, devastating droughts, crazy storms**

* And also the sensations these consequences may give rise to: hunger, thirst, reduced number of available choices in different ways etc. To talk about less talked-about potential impacts can lead to curiosity, increased understanding and renewed energy to become engaged.

** Risks becoming overly unpleasant, which makes defensive mechanisms kick in. When impacts are communicated relevant, possible and meaningful solutions should also be presented.

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 51

A trend that brings more floods, wildfires and violent storms*, due to increasing temperatures and rising sea levels

...snarare än...

A trend that brings increasing temperatures and rising sea levels

* And also the sensations these consequences can give rise to perhaps: hunger, thirst, reduced number of available choices in different ways.

The now's relationship to the future

Comparison 52

Uncertainties in time – e.g., "Sea levels will rise by at least 50 cm, and this will occur at some time between 2060 och 2093"*

...rather than...

Uncertainties in outcomes – e.g., "By 2072, sea levels will rise between 25 och 68 cm, with 50 cm being the average projection"

* [Source] [Go to framing quiz, see question 4] [Go to guide about communication of remaining climate uncertainties]

Comparison 53

Something that should be dealt with today, since it can reduce – and insure against – future risks such as disease proliferation and freshwater shortages*

...rather than...

Something that if we don't act now will punish us with increasing wrath, turning especially apocalyptic around 2100/2050

* This also carries a positive emphasis, which can create more engagement.

Comparison 54

> A chance to look oneself and one's footprint in the eyes – and then grasp, in order to leave behind a good legacy*

> ...rather than...

> A fateful question that we need to deal with for the sake of future generations

Lets the person extend itself into the future rather than just have it to think about other people.

Clear and simple to understand

Skip scientific jargon

Comparison 55

> As in need of counteraction

> ...rather than...

> As in need of mitigation*/prevention**

Uncommon word that makes climate disruption sound non-acute.

*** Sounds like the consequences are in the future.*

Comparison 56

> As in need of response and preparation

> ...rather than...

> As in need of adaptation*

Inducing of feelings of inferiority as well as bearing more reactive than proactive vibes.

Comparison 57

A serious deviation in the carbon and water cycles – which all life is built upon

...rather than...

A reaction in response to an imbalance in a complex chain of biological, chemical and physical cycles and interplays

Comparison 58

With terms such as 'parts per million', billions tons of greenhouse gases, 'self-enhancing malicious spiral', understanding' and 'max 2 degrees Celsius extra'

...rather than...

With terms such as 'ppm', 'GtCO2e', 'positive feedback', 'theory' and 'the two-degree target'*

Scientific jargon is often misinterpreted and can alienate people. Moreover, using words that are difficult to pronounce comes at a high cost.

Comparison 59

A phenomenon that takes place because humanity's pollution of the atmosphere traps 4 Hiroshima bombs worth of extra heat energy – each second*

...rather than...

A phenomenon that takes place because we have increased the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from 280 ppm to 400 ppm

* *[Source]*

Comparison 60

A policy challenge in need of pollution fees, making emissions costly

...rather than...

A policy challenge in which externalities need to be internalized through carbon pricing*

The word 'tax' is tremendously disliked [Go to master's thesis, p. 11]. 'Compensation' also is a promising replacement Go to framing quiz, see question 1].

Recent addition (13 Dec 2016)

Comparison 61

A problem that the gas carbon dioxide causes by thickening Earth's blanket

...snarare än...

A problem that CO_2 causes by trapping outgoing heat

Avoid interpretation pitfalls

Comparison 62

'Climate disruption', 'global heating' or 'weather pollution'*

...rather than...

'Global warming** or 'climate change'***

Easy to understand and directly health related – and everyone dislikes bad weather.

*** Difficult to interpret, can sound welcome, handles cold winters poorly.*

**** Ambivalent, invites to focus on natural variation.*

Comparison 63

A scientific field in which scientists first should communicate what they know with certainty*

...rather than...

A scientific field in which scientists should first communicate the remaining uncertainties

[Go to guide about communication of remaining climate uncertainties]

Comparison 64

A research area hard-working climate scientists constantly try to understand even better, not least in a meteorological cooperation called IPCC

...rather than...

A research area led by the IPCC, a UN organization in which researchers and representatives for the world's governments write research syntheses*

Can lead to ideologically driven suspicions of imposed world governance.

Comparison 65

Something that to 90–100 % probability is caused by human activity

...rather than...

Something that very likely is caused by human activity*

Interpreted by most people as much lower than 90 %. [Go to framin quiz, see question 9]

Comparison 66

A collective as well as individual ordeal that requires many large streams to make a sufficiently powerful river

...rather than...

A collective "many small streams..." trial

A shock to humanity's life-sustaining system – which during civilization's history has been relatively stable – that one should be *convinced* about

...rather than...

A shock to humanity's life-sustaining system – which during civilization's history has been relatively stable – than one should *believe* in

A set of concerns with different degrees of associated *risk**

...rather than...

A set of concerns with different degrees of associated *uncertainty*

* *[Go to guide about communication of remaining climate uncertainties]*

An enormous headache that through today's *unreasonable development** only will get worse

...rather than...

An enormous headache that through today's *unsustainable development*** only will get worse

* *Direct, sharp and easy to understand.*

*** Can be interpreted in multiple ways, requires knowledge about what is sustainable, and has become a cliché with dubious use these days.*

Comparison 70

A potentially civilization-developing spur with steps that include a transition to *clean energy**

...rather than...

A potentially civilization-developing spur with steps that include a transition to *renewable energy***

* Is straightforward and connects well to pollution frames.

** Is quite diffuse and in need of clear definitions. Moreover, its exclusion of nuclear power can alienate people unnecessarily.

Time to start a new conversation

If communicators consistently had talked about climate disruption as in the bubbles to the left, the world's societies would probably be much better situated than currently to counteract, respond to and prepare against climate disruption. (if there is a point you don't agree with, please comment below!). Rather than being polarizing and leaving all too many people disengaged, the issue could have been an all-inclusive challenge that everyone gladly engages with or at least expresses large support for.

This does not mean that there must be no disputes. On the contrary, as some of the comparisons above show, more passionate disagreements (in the short term) is a prerequisite for finding common ground (in the long term). What's needed, though, is to move the debate from climate science to what the findings mean for people, to which policies we should enact, and to which values to collectively promote.

It is clear, then, that improved climate communication is long overdue. What is advocated above is no panacea – everything is context dependent, more testing is needed and all of it is much too binary for an issue whose communication always needs to be tailored and that will encounter resistance – but it can still be useful. Because communicators immediately need to change the prevailing conceptual frames (particular messages and clever language) in the public debate. Moreover – and even more importantly – they also need to replace the deep frames that activate

self-focused (extrinsic) values with deep frames that instead activate the self-transcending, compassionate (intrinsic) values we all share.

Note that re-framing should not and needs not entail dishonesty or manipulation: the imperative to always communicate always truthfully does not negate the fact that there always are multiple ways to present information and ideas. Just as how there concerning nudging (which some framing can be viewed as) is no such thing as a neutral choice architecture, there is no such thing as neutral communication.

Also note that it is important to remember that no single messenger suits all audiences. It is considerably more likely for a message to work if it comes from a leader – e.g. a politician or a grasstops leader (a leader of a grassroots organization) – that the audience trusts.

Checklist

The following is an attempt at an checklist based on the thought experiment to use to inform strategies and tactics that intend to create inclusive climate communication:

☐

Think holistically

Climate disruption is a looking glass which affects our perspectives about ourselves and everything on the planet, so it is unreasonable to think that there are magic words or that one-way 'messaging' can do much on its own – but as part of wide public engagement activities and grander narratives they can be of great help…

☐

Give the conversation partner reason to stay

…Really great solutions aren't silver bullets either, simply because everyone won't think they are great and thus might be scared off – so consider thinking 'values-up' instead of 'numbers/proposals-down' and walk with rather than against people as their minds evaluate the underlying problem by working backwards from solutions they like/dislike…

☐

Keep it simple

…Moreover, it helps if you make it easy to understand the problem's causes and magnitude and its solutions (including by using language and figures that people readily understand) – and tell simple and coherent stories (and new ones, if possible, thus opening up the climate story for new and diverse interpretations)…

☐

Accept complexity

…At the same time, don't trivialize the scale and difficult nature of the problem – and know that even a well-defined audience will host a multitude of reactions to a message, which all deserve to be heard and debated publicly (but not in falsely balanced ways between disingenuous PR experts and media-novice scientists) as well as around the kitchen table…

☐

Tailor your message (with novelty, without oversimplifications)

…Indeed, frame the message around things the audience is passionate about (and on the possibility to achieve increased likelihoods of avoiding harms to these), preferably in terms of impacts the audience might not have heard about before, rather than just try to provide people with more facts – but don't assume that you know what this is (in other words, find out beforehand if possible)…

☐

Emotions must be addressed – and harnessed

…An honest account of probable impacts then requires being forthcoming in terms of creating supportive space to openly (and perhaps fiercely) discuss the issue and embrace the emotions that will follow, especially in order to prevent defense mechanisms from kicking in and to instead use those feelings as catalysts for engagement…

☐

Everybody likes good action

…One crucial part of this is to not forget to couple impacts with meaningful and relevant solutions ('insurance policies' against climate risk) that exist on all levels, both in the form of counteraction and in the form of response and preparation – but be careful to not tone down the scope of change necessary and to communicate the co-benefits and positive visions that can be realized (and do so in a constructive way rather than by exaggerating and 'bright-siding' by saying that everything will be fine)…

☐

Don't tell people what to think

…Remember, though, that it is always a big no-no to claim interpretative prerogative (including by propagating doom-mongering and other binary, extreme views) – as long as one doesn't wreak willful destruction, it is OK to be unconvinced about everything climate related (but do try to direct the question marks towards available solutions rather than climate science)…

☐

Value the right values

…However, this does not mean that poor narratives and frames shouldn't be challenged – e.g., frames favoring self-focused, extrinsic values need to be drowned out by ones favoring self-

transcending, compassionate, intrinsic ones, and personalized narratives regarding what's at stake need to replace impersonal, distant ones…

☐

Don't put off what you can do today

…Because sufficient climate action needs to start immediately – so talk mostly about the present, including by connecting the future to the now, e.g. by focusing more on legacy and path dependencies resulting from decisions today than on unborn people…

☐

What science is and is not

…However, science is not a crystal ball (meaning that the focus should be on eventual outcomes instead of specific years) but rather a method for asking ever more precise questions about the world – so make sure the recipients understand that climate disruption's basics are long settled but that even more detailed knowledge constantly is evolving (meaning that uncertainties should be treated as cautionary warnings, not excuses for passiveness), just as with all science…

☐

Work *with* the subconscious

…For instance, and finally, developments in psychology over the last decades has unearthed many of the reasons for why you shouldn't be surprised if a flawlessly crafted message still ends up having no effect, namely due to the brain's automatic system with its heuristics and biases. That's why nudging [Go to the world-leading nudge database] (and strong policy) is a necessary complement to communication.

Log

Inspiration

Academic articles

Bain, P. el al. (2015). Co-benefits of addressing climate change can motivate action around the world. Nature Climate Change, 20150928. DOI: 10.1038/NCLIMATE2814.

Ballard, T. & Lewandowsky, S. (2015). When not if: The inescapability of an uncertain climate. Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society A 373: 20140464. DOI: 10.1098/rsta.2014.0464.

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