

Communicating Climate Change - Motivating Civic Action: Opportunity for Democratic Renewal?*

Draft¹

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¹ This paper draws on and extends my discussion of the role of communication in building a social movement for climate change in a forthcoming book chapter (see Moser, forthcoming a). It also builds on the insights generated in a multi-collaborator, three-year project led by myself and Lisa Dilling (University of Colorado, Boulder), and summarized in a forthcoming anthology from Cambridge University Press (see Moser and Dilling, eds., forthcoming; see also <http://www.isse.ucar.edu/communication>).

Introduction

Communication can play an essential role in mobilizing and sustaining citizen and civic action in response to climate change. It can facilitate civic action and as such expresses and supports the fundamental work of civic engagement in a democracy. A first approach to this deep linkage is through language: communication and community go back to the same linguistic root.

Etymologically, the word “to communicate” derives from a Latin word that means “to impart”, “to share”, and “to make common;” in turn, the word “common” derives from the two roots *com-* “together” and *munia* “public duties” (Harper 2001). This etymology links communication closely to the ideal of citizen and civic action. Of course, communication and community can also mutually foster each other in a very real sense. On the other hand, communication can also alienate individuals from acting in the public sphere and hence completely fail to be an instrument of citizenship. Thus, communication needs to be designed and executed effectively, if it is to be a useful tool in building and sustaining the community that acts on a *res publica* (a matter of public interest) such as climate change, and in helping us create and feel part of a civic community.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the substantial literature on civic engagement in American democracy, the crisis that many perceive therein, and the “civic renewal movement” discussed since the 1990s. It is useful, however, to borrow from that literature the distinction of “being a citizen,” i.e., in a narrow sense merely being an individual member of a city, country, or otherwise defined community, from “participating in civic action.” The former may be quite divorced from public and political life and relegated to being a self-interested individual acting on his or her own needs and wants, consuming goods and services, and otherwise ensuring that these personal desires are met (through complaints, advocacy, volunteering, or the singular political act of voting). Clearly, people can do something as individuals to reduce their energy use and emissions. In this case, a discussion of the role of communication would be oriented toward fostering individual behavior change. Someone engaging in civic action, by contrast, is an individual whose actions are committed to, done with awareness and in support of, a larger social, common, public goal. Differently put, civic action is public action by members of a community in response to a public matter of great concern – in this case climate change. According to Boyte and Kari (1996), civic action is “public work” – work of all sorts done *in* public, *by* the public, *of* the public, and *for* the public. “‘Public work’ is work by ordinary people that builds and sustains our basic public goods and resources—what used to be called ‘our commonwealth’” (Boyte and Kari, 1996).

It is easy to see then why communication should play a critical role in it. How we speak about the issue that concerns us, how we talk with one another, and how we articulate the solutions to the problem make all the difference. Communication is the most basic means by which we express the focus of civic action. It helps create a lens through which we view the matter of concern, understand its deeper causes, implications, and solutions. As a means to create common cause and understanding, it makes connections, generates the public, and builds community. It develops and feeds on social capital. With a focus on civic, rather than citizen, action, I thus will emphasize how communication can facilitate engagement in civic affairs related to climate change.

This is no small order. It is difficult enough to communicate the unwieldy problem of global climate change to lay publics; it is extraordinarily difficult to overcome the lethargy, habits of thought and action, and institutional arrangements that underlie our current energy-consuming, emissions-generating behaviors. Starting from the assumption of individuals as political actors adds the challenge of widespread disenfranchisement from the political process, so commonly observed in contemporary American society.

Thus, I begin with a discussion of the reasons why people do *not* engage in civic action, and follow this by the fundamental roles communication *could* play in facilitating civic engagement on climate change. I then offer a series of concrete strategies to overcome the hurdles and barriers to civic action and close with a short conclusion on the critical role of effective communication in democratic societies.

Why Do People Not Engage in Civic Action?

Given the emerging evidence for growing action on climate change at various scales and in various sectors of society, it would clearly be over-generalizing, if not outright misleading, to suggest that Americans and Canadians are not yet engaged in civic action on this issue. In fact, I argue elsewhere that a climate protection movement is slowly emerging in the United States (Moser, 2007). But movements begin small and North American society by and large is not yet fully on board.² So, if our interest is in the role that effective communication can play in mobilizing civic action, then the focus – at least initially – must be on those who are not yet engaged. I would argue even more strongly that if we understood more fully the reasons why people don't engage in civic action on climate change, we might give our communication efforts a clearer focus and infuse it with a longer "shelf life" than the average 10-second sound bite or 10-month outreach campaign.

Below, I classify the barriers to civic engagement on climate change in four, rather arbitrary categories. While not suggesting a logical or chronological sequence from one to the next, I begin with understanding the internal (psychological and cognitive) processes that may prevent an individual from engaging on this issue, and then proceed to social, political, and other person-external barriers.

Psychological-cognitive barriers

How an individual internally processes information about climate change may motivate or demotivate her to engage on it more deeply. For example, individuals may deny the threat, believe that they are not at risk or it won't happen here or in their life times. They may engage in wishful thinking or rationalization that the problem will go away on its own, is less severe than believed, or that silver-bullet solutions will be found. They may also displace their attention on other, maybe more immediate, issues. This type of reaction is common among those who may identify as "environmentalist" but who may simply feel disempowered vis-à-vis the problem itself. Common responses are that global warming is just too big, too overwhelming for them to deal with. They may feel trapped, be fatalistic (see, e.g., Immerwahr, 1999), or nurture a form of

² Expressing support for political action by government or industry in opinion polls, while indicative and encouraging, is a long way from actively engaging in civic action. Examples of such recent polls can be found in ABC News/TIME/Stanford University (2006), PIPA (2005), and Brewer (2005).

“capitulatory imagination” (Loeb, 2004: 128), i.e., in thoughts and images of the issue and the future that lead to giving up. These types of cognitive and emotional responses are particularly common in response to scary, overwhelming issues. Among the leading maladaptive responses to threats which are particularly scary, ill-understood, difficult to control, overwhelming, and in which people are complicit – such as global climate change – is psychic numbing or apathy (for a fuller discussion, see Moser, forthcoming b). Communication efforts that disregard such emotional responses are likely to fail.

If we assume for a moment that people do not shut down to information about climate change, there are additional person-internal barriers, however, that are very much linked to communication and that could fail to engage and motivate people to act on the issue. For example, people may not understand the issue (causes) or fail to see the relevance to their daily lives (impacts and solutions). They may also not understand, be confused by, or simply disagree with, the action and policy goals or strategies proposed to address the issue. Sorting out all the arguments put forward by the main communicators on this issue – historically, mainly scientists, environmental advocates, and – in the US – climate contrarians via the media – is particularly challenging for lay audiences and on any issue as complex as climate change. Moreover, people may not feel motivated by the future vision promoted (often one of doom). Finally, but importantly, the ways in which climate change is framed, and the language used to discuss it, may simply not resonate with people, or not mobilize them into collective action. Differently put, framing climate change as a “CO₂ problem”, an “energy problem”, the “greenhouse effect”, or as a matter of “national security” mobilizes some, rallies others in opposition, and leaves others completely disengaged.

Social barriers

Individuals are social beings, whether or not they engage in expressly civic action. We are embedded in social networks, form social identities, engage in social interactions, and in doing so, adhere to varying degrees to social norms that tell us what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior. If engaging in civic action on climate change portrays a particular social identity, and our own does not conform, or overtly conflicts with that identity, we are unlikely to engage in this particular type of civic action. Closely related is the observation that civic engagement on a particular issue (and in a particular way) can produce a social stigma that may not be acceptable. For example, if someone considers joining a social movement, doing so may involve adopting a “movement identity” which may conflict with how that person wants to be seen by his peers. Importantly, civic engagement also takes time, resources, may be inconvenient or too demanding given other daily concerns and obligations. Considerable lethargy and apathy may have to be overcome and even those who feel sympathetic to a cause or are inclined to partake in civic action face huge demands competing for their limited time and attention. Finally, individuals – deeply embedded in society through socialization, institutions and modern-day activities – may simply agree with the existing social norms, which allow and support emission-generating behavior, and by implication disagree with the social norms that suggest alternative behavior. Communicators interested in civic engagement, i.e., in a deeply social activity, would do well not to dismiss the social dimension in which individuals live and decide to act – or not act.

Political barriers

Individuals as political actors face yet another set of barriers, which are of particular relevance to civic engagement. First, people may be generally disinterested in political matters, prefer to leave political activism to others, and/or may feel deeply disenfranchised from the political process. Election campaigns serve as good reminders of why this general political disengagement is such an ominous obstacle: what issues get played up, which are neglected, how they are framed and discussed in televised debates, and which constituents organizers go after to gain the edge on the votes, all speak volumes of the challenge of mobilizing certain sections of the electorate. Sometimes “special interest politics”, harking on very narrowly defined, but hugely emotional issues, or focusing on the more tangible, local can help break through these forms of political apathy. They may help explain why many much rather focus on matters of personal concern, impact, and influence.

Others may hold on to various beliefs that demotivate them to take personal action or come together with others to engage in civic action. For example, they may still believe that government or industry or some other “other” will rise to the occasion and take care of the problem (a form of political transference). Clearly, they don’t believe that existing institutions are failing, thus why should they do anything that may be inconvenient? A related response is blaming others for the problem and/or projecting responsibility for remedial action onto someone else, preferably on experts who will develop the necessary technological fix. Others may simply refuse – holding on to tradition and habit – to do anything different. Scientific uncertainty about the causes, urgency, or solutions of a problem can be a tremendously convenient excuse to hold on to the status quo.

Other structural, economic, institutional, and technological barriers

Even if the internal psycho-cognitive and external social and political barriers could be overcome, a person may still face overwhelming barriers to taking action. These commonly undermine efforts to encourage individual behavior change, but can equally hinder civic engagement. The barriers I refer to are structural in nature: an alternative technology is not yet available or exceedingly inconvenient or expensive to employ; existing laws and regulations may prohibit an alternative course of action; public infrastructure is not in place to allow switching to alternative fuels; political institutions and electoral processes are heavily controlled by vested interests, leaving little room for reform, much less deeper shifts in political control over decision-making processes.

In what is generally viewed as “the information age” some may not view existing information channels and communication infrastructure as limiting in support of civic action. And yet, they may be. An over-abundance of information leads many to place heavy filters on the type and amount of information they still allow in. Newsprint readership is declining, while internet news sources are increasingly sought out. TV news consumption remains the main source of information for Americans [need to add refs here], but depth of coverage of any issue there carries a heavy price tag and is sorely limited relative to the complexity of global affairs. Moreover, the political economy of the media industry, with its ever-growing concentration of media ownership, and – arguably – consequent narrowing of the range of news and diversity of voices heard in mass communication channels does not offer individuals the breadth of views that may allow them to form a well informed opinion. More typically, people exist in rather

homophilous socioeconomic-political-informational environments that are rather isolated from different, yet similarly homophilous sections of society.

This list of barriers to civic engagement is certainly not complete, but highlights some that are critical to consider when designing communication campaigns that mobilize individuals to partake in civic action. If effective, what role could communication play in facilitating civic engagement?

The Potential Role for Communication in Facilitating Civic Action

In this section, I highlight eight fundamental roles communication can play in mobilizing people. I discuss each with particular reference to the challenging issue of climate change.

1. *Problem framing and (social and political) agenda setting.*

As suggested above, naming and framing an issue is one of the most fundamental challenges for communicators, especially for an “invisible” global problem such as climate change. According to Lakoff, frames are “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (Lakoff, 2004, p.xv). Frames – expressed and suggested through language, images, gestures, and the messengers who use them – “shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as good or bad outcome of our actions” (ibid.).

The task of framing – and re-framing as an issue evolves in public consciousness and the political process – is to identify those frame(s) that promise to be most powerful to a particular group of social actors. Frames are strategic tools of social movements (Goffman 1974); they are also the “weapons” of those who would rather undermine political action. The history of public debate of climate change in the United States (but more recently also in Europe and Australia), in which climate contrarians have deeply influenced the framing and discussion of the issue attests to the power of framing and of access to the media channel that would promote them (McCright and Dunlap, 2001, 2003).

2. *Widening the circle of the engaged: education and persuasion*

Most social challenges engage – fairly rapidly – a small section of the general population that is well educated and informed about it, maybe directly affected, or else fundamentally inclined to support that particular social cause, and politically active on principle. This group may be called “the usual suspects” on any given issue. The vast majority of the population, however, must come to civic action on the issue – if at all – through education and persuasion that they *should* engage. Thus, communicators must make global warming visible; must help people understand – at least in the most basic ways – the causes underlying it, its implications, the possible solution options, as well as the implications of not implementing the solutions. To encourage and empower people, they must also convince people that feasible solutions are available and that they can make a difference in employing and supporting them. To place your valuable time and resources on an issue, you need to know that it will make a difference. If communicators only paint a grim picture of the problem without offering feasible solutions, or without given people a sense that they can play an essential part in them, is unlikely to attract many followers.

3. *Demonstrating the failure of existing institutions and the need for political change.*

In a political environment where many feel disenfranchised, communicators face the tremendous challenge of demonstrating that those who should be tackling the problem are not doing so sufficiently. Moreover, in a culture that holds strong beliefs about the power of technology to solve intractable problems (thus promising that we may not have to change our ways, much less sacrifice the conveniences of our modern western lives), communicators must also help people sort through the many technological options available and understand the implications of choosing any one. These are no easy or clear-cut tasks with a complex problem like climate change. Because we are all fundamentally implicated in creating the problem by our own daily emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases, we cannot avoid taking responsibility. We have found the enemy and she is us – not a particularly inviting, engaging, or easy truth to face.

Climate change also has no easy “quick fix” solution. Some of the technologies currently available may not alleviate the climate problem; some may in fact aggravate it or have negative implications on other environmental or social problems. Moreover, because of the lags in the human (social, economic and technological) structures and in the climate system, we increasingly have to face the reality that our attention (and resources) will have to be divided on the tasks of mitigation and adaptation. This presents a challenge to communicators, adds to our responsibilities, potentially divides the focus of collective action, and may produce challenging trade-offs.

4. Crossing boundaries across social divides

[from here on, only notes; will have to be edited and turned into running ext, but I ran out of time to meet today's deadline]

If we're only talking to like-minded people, we will feel good having a wonderful circle of friends, but our ideas will have limited reach.

The task is to find ways to reach across the social boundaries that separate society, including those who may have been turned-off by the debate. It's not easy to cross the divides that separate different ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, age cohorts, party affiliations, religions, or other associations of social engagement. It requires much reframing and negotiation of not just the language with which an issue is discussed, but also the substance, the very focus of activist struggles.

Requires great cultural and political sensitivity, linguistic vigilance, and strategic creativity (Meyer and Whittier 1994)

5. Sustaining and managing civic engagement

Difficult task of sustaining civic action and engagement through its ups and downs and through the slow times of a long struggle. “issue-attention cycle” (Downs 1972).

6. Building community and countering isolation

One of the opposition's tools is to create the impression (if not the actual reality) that there are only isolated individuals, marginalized organizations, and disconnected efforts underway trying to push for unnecessary changes in the status quo. “Divide and conquer” is not just a military but also a political strategy.

Climate change – by its very nature – seems to play into the strategies of those who would rather undermine political action and social engagement on the issue: it is all too easy as an individual to feel isolated and powerless vis-à-vis this immense problem.

Need to help overcome the sense of isolation that individuals may experience, to create a sense of the collective. Communicators can tap into the yearning for community, the moral sense of responsibility that goes beyond one's small self-interest, and creatively illustrate that collectively, many individual actions add up to make a difference.

7. Developing an engaging, morally compelling social vision

Knowing how long and difficult the struggle will be, how global climate may get worse before it gets any better, and thus anticipating that people will not get quick positive reinforcement for all their efforts from political leaders or the environment, communicators must help facilitate the development of a truly compelling vision for the long haul. The communicative imperative is to “mid-wife” the development of this vision and to help make this visioning process inclusive and engaging.

The vision will have to be believable, positive, open-ended, problem-solving, and meaning-giving (Olson 1995). It cannot just be about avoiding a potential climate crisis, but has to paint the picture of a better future environmentally, socially, and economically, one that is worth fighting for.

8. Establishing and spreading new social norms

Civic engagement, fundamentally, is not just about fixing a particular social problem. More fundamentally, it can help change deeply held beliefs, social norms, and institutions; they can – if successful – achieve paradigm shifts in society. And as suggested in the introduction, can reinvigorate the democratic political process.

Changing values and beliefs is a long-term, inter-generational project.

Educational, religious and other civic institutions will play important roles in this deeper transformation. For communicators, however, it is important to understand how strongly our behavior is driven by values and beliefs.

For example, repeatedly condemning the pervasive climate-damaging behaviors of individuals or industries – contrary to the intent of advocates – ends up confirming that such behavior is (still) the social norm and hence acceptable. Why should I behave differently, if everyone else does the same thing? The communicative imperative therefore is to help bring about new social norms by illustrating them, living them, and communicating them in every possible way so that audiences recognize them as “appropriate” and “normal.”

As social norms become widely acknowledged and internalized, people will be motivated not just by external pressures or incentives, but also – and more reliably – by their innermost values and beliefs (DeYoung 2000; Kaplan 2000; Gärling et al. 2003).

In summary, civic engagement depends critically on effective communication. Communicators frame the issue of concern; mobilize social, political actors and their opposition; and the solutions. They can help build a movement, sustain and manage it through challenging times, cross social divides, and assist in the deeper societal transformation. The nature of climate change makes these communication tasks particularly challenging. The section below offers ten communication strategies to deal with these challenges.

Communication Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Civic Action on Climate Change

The fundamental challenge of effective communication for social change is this. For communication to be “effective”, i.e., facilitate an intended social change, or – in the case here, mobilize people for civic action on climate change – it has to achieve two things: (1) elevate motivation to get involved and (2) lower the barriers/resistance to that engagement or change in behavior.

[Need to match and adapt these to the barriers why people not engage in civic action]

1. Increase the sense of urgency

- problem is here, now, underway, will take a long time and huge effort to solve
- delay now makes later solutions more difficult, more expensive
- moral obligation
- first steps can actually save energy and money, rather than demand major changes; improve our lives, economies rather than disrupt them
- use metaphors of acting with long times in mind (retirement or college savings)
- tap into people's desire to be responsible, reasonable people

2. Link climate to everything else

- stop reiterating climate change as an environmental challenge only; it's a social, economic, educational, security, etc. problem
- communicators can instead use these linkages to redefine climate change as a deeply social and environmental issue, and thus help connect communities struggling for other goals with the emerging climate movement
- The implied communication strategy may be counter-intuitive: not every conversation must begin with climate. Instead, we can open the door to climate change from a different side of the common house

3. Take control over the framing

- Many climate scientists and environmental advocates have taken pains to respond to every misinformation and misleading statement by climate contrarians. There is good reason to do so – misinformation should not be left standing unchallenged and opportunities to educate the public should not be missed. But this pattern has left the pro-environmental and scientific side on the defensive.
- It is always more powerful to define the frame than respond to someone else's.

4. Don't hide uncertainty and don't hide behind it

- Looking over the past 20 years of research, what's remarkable is not how much remains uncertain, but how strong the scientific consensus on climate change has grown. At the same time, there remains a (albeit lessening) public impression – fed by climate contrarians and common media practices – that there still is scientific controversy over the basic notion of human-caused climate change
- Communicators – to strengthen public resolve – have three tasks:
 - o first, to continue to convey the state of the science – relying on credible sources to communicate how the confidence in the scientific community has grown over time
 - o convey the nature of science as an activity that will always push back the frontiers of the unknown, and in the process, stumble upon findings that require revisions of what was previously thought to be known
 - o communicators must never overstate the scientific confidence with which aspects of climate change are known. To retain their credibility, communicators should lead with what is most certain, but never hide or misrepresent uncertainty
- unsubstantiated claim that we need to know everything for sure before we can act; what's for sure is that uncertainty must not be a showstopper

5. *Be very, very careful with alarmist messages*

- A common tactic advocates use when trying to convince others of the seriousness of an issue is to focus on what's most scary, and sometimes make it sound scarier than it actually is. The impulse – especially around climate change – is understandable, but the success of this approach is far from guaranteed and the price to pay potentially tremendous
- written off by political opponents as “alarmists.”
- gamble with their credibility
- alarmist messages may produce not just denial and inaction, but responses that could make things worse
- a communication strategy that does not – very quickly – tell people that there are feasible solutions with which we can begin to address the problem, and what specific and appropriate actions individuals can take to help, is more likely to hinder than help the mobilization effort.

6. *Don't get hung up on words, create meaning instead*

- Words are signifiers that trigger deeper meaning. Words carry history, institutional baggage, culturally and thus temporally specific meanings. Words can build trust and even more quickly break it. Words can heal or be weapons.
- the name of the new movement is important, and the naming should be conscious and strategic. But most important is not the name but how people relate to what the movement stands for
- If a movement clearly stands for communal values, for a positive future, for efforts to ensure a livable world and a just and meaningful life, it could be called almost anything

7. *Don't try to persuade everyone, just focus on the critical few*

- *connectors*, are people who seem to know everyone – well-connected individuals with enormous rolodexes, extensive social lives, and in particular social lives that cross social divides
- *mavens* – individuals with a seemingly unlimited repertoire of knowledge and resources to find out whatever they may not know
- *salesmen* – those who know how to make just about anything attractive and relevant to you, and make you come along for the ride
- help the climate movement take off, those already in it would do well to identify connectors, mavens, and salespeople within each new community they want to spread to. This promises to be more effective and efficient than trying to persuade masses of random individuals one by one

8. Use “people like us” and reach across social divides

- in a diverse society, these social separations are not absolute, but for socio-historical, institutional, and psychological reasons, divisions are common place and hard to overcome
- “People like us” (or PLUs as Julian Agyeman has called them) are important for our personal comfort, identity, and group-internal norms and cohesion. Often, PLUs (especially if we know them personally) have greater credibility and legitimacy than someone who does not know our circumstances as well
- Sometimes information can only be heard and taken in as relevant and important if it is conveyed by PLUs
- choose its messengers carefully and strategically if it wants to approach a heretofore uninvolved group; PLUs may be all the more critical the more socially cohesive and impenetrable the yet-uninvolved group is

9. Begin building a positive vision worth fighting for

- Movement members alive today are unlikely to see greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere return to pre-industrial levels, or even to 2005 levels
- This is not to be discouraging, but realistic about the time lags built into our social and the climate system. It requires that the movement think hard about what “success” or “winning” would look like, an important element of its communication strategy
- The vision that the movement will define thus must include measures of progress. Communicators must convey these indicators of forward achievement just as much – and maybe even more – than what is wrong or not yet happening.
- acknowledge and appreciate those who act in exemplary ways, thus portraying and spreading the social norms of the future

10. Be kind

- Social movements fight oppositions. They feed on having “enemies,” too; an easily visible and strategically useful target.
- For some these fights will be matters of life or death; for others they will be over historical status, power, and livelihoods
- We here on spaceship Earth are all in this together. Those who today may be the movement’s opponents will still share this one planet tomorrow. Global warming will not be solved by a few, but by cooperation among the many. It is in the hands of every

- movement member to either make this cooperation harder through hostility or – the firm commitment to the issue notwithstanding – a little easier through basic decency and kindness
- there are more than verbal ties between our common future, communal struggle, and communication

Conclusion

Basically this: Communication plays critical role in mobilizing people for civic engagement; on an issue so deeply affecting the very workings of society – through its potential impacts and the societal transformation required to address solutions, civic action on climate change, and the communication that will facilitate (or hinder it), can play an important role in rejuvenating the political process in the United States.

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