

Framing climate change

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, JUL 12 2010

At my home institution, I'm involved in a project to reduce carbon emissions via individual behavioral changes. A relatively small group of scholars and administrators have been looking at some interesting theoretical and empirical social science research to bolster our efforts.

To understand what I have in mind, consider an example of behavioral change mentioned earlier this year by David Roberts of Grist. Roberts noted that an energy consulting company had devised a simple chart about home energy consumption that could be placed easily and cheaply on utility bills. Do this, Roberts notes,

"and you get about a 2 percent average drop in energy use. And it hardly costs the utilities anything! They already have the data. It's just a different way of presenting information, informed by good social science."

We've already tried something similar on my campus. A colleague on the "Green Team" directed a group of students to conduct energy usage assessments of faculty and staff offices across the College of Arts and Sciences. Then, they distributed the information back to the individuals. We'd next like to place estimated energy consumption meters in the open spaces of various buildings, with data streamed also to personal office computers. Unfortunately, virtually all the data is estimated because few of our campus buildings have energy consumption meters. Also, because the university is simultaneously greening much of its operations (a new performance contract requires CFL installation, etc.), we cannot readily know how much reduced energy consumption is a result of this particular exercise.

In any case, social psychologist Robert Cialdini told Grist that "there's more than 50 years of scientific research on this stuff. It just hasn't been communicated broadly or translated into policy." In an interview with Grist's Roberts, Cialdini noted that the research is located "In the academic journals. In places where people wouldn't ever be able to find it, and if they could, they couldn't parse it — it's jargon laden."

Generally, how can climate messages be simplified? How do we do it for entire nations and the international community? The recent very high temperatures in the USA have me again thinking about how to frame climate change for national and global audiences.

Mike Hulme, Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, has publicly worried about what he has called a counterproductive "discourse of catastrophe" that tends to be associated with climate change activism — even at the diplomatic level.

The language of fear and terror operates as an ever-weakening vehicle for effective communication or inducement for behavioural change.

This has been seen in other areas of public health risk. Empirical work in relation to climate change communication and public perception shows that it operates here too.

Framing climate change as an issue which evokes fear and personal stress becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By "sexing it up" we exacerbate, through psychological amplifiers, the very risks we are trying to ward off.

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I hate to spoil the punchline, but Hulme concludes that “the discourse of catastrophe is in danger of tipping society onto a negative, depressive and reactionary trajectory.”

In an article published about the time of the Copenhagen meetings, Cardiff University psychologists Alexa Spence and Nick Pidgeon explained that fear appeals potentially have value, but need to be carefully calibrated:

the psychological literature on this point indicates substantial evidence, from domains such as health protection, that fear framing will initiate action as long as individuals feel that they have some degree of control to act in response to the problem. When control is absent, internal psychological defenses, such as denial, can minimize fear. Climate communicators should therefore seek to frame emotive messages alongside positive, credible steps which people themselves can take.

So, it appears the trick is to employ fear, but offer tangible action items — like realistic means to reduce energy consumption. That kind of advice makes sense for individuals, but can it work for entire nations?

I suspect that requires concerted effort to translate global and national goals to individual action.

Think globally, act locally?

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