


Book Review

The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public

Reviewed by Gebriel Tesfatsion, University of Tsukuba, Japan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2127-5508>

ABSTRACT

The book *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public* created by the Centre for Research on Environmental Decisions (CRED) is a useful guide for climate change communicators to make climate change communication more effective. It shows the centrality of (social) psychology for effective climate change communication that results in positive behavior change in people. The guide breaks down the psychology-based strategy for effective communication for behavior change into clear, easy to follow steps with real life examples to illustrate the steps.

KEYWORDS

Behavior Change, Climate Change, Communication, Contingency, Environment, Social Psychology

REVIEW

Climate change communicators have been compared to Noah in that their warning of the peril of climate change and their pleas to the world to change its destructive behavior towards the environment have fallen on deaf ears as the problem of climate change, described as an ‘existential threat,’ is yet to receive the urgent, immediate. Despite concerted campaigns to raise awareness about climate change for decades, these messages have not resulted in the required positive behavior change in people to inspire them to act responsibly towards their environment. The guidebook, “*The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public*,” created by the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions (CRED) and written by Debika Shome and Sabine Marx, addresses this timely, critical question, the question, “Why aren’t people more concerned about climate change?” The purpose of the guidebook is to assist

climate change communicators to ‘make climate change presentations and discussions more effective’. It argues that climate change communications have been largely ineffective because it overlooks the people’s psychology, ‘the difficulties that individuals and groups have in processing and responding effectively to the information surrounding long-term and complex societal challenges’ (p. 1).

The book has two sides: on the first side, it provides explanations as to why climate change communications have failed to result in positive behavior change in people, and on the other hand, it offers guides on how to correct these shortcomings and make the communication more effective, that inspires positive behavior change. The problem of climate change communication pertains to the larger question of communication for behavior change. The book situates the problem in social psychology, ‘the scientific study of how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, and implied presence of others, ‘imagined’ and ‘implied presences’ referring to the internalized social norms that humans are influenced by even when they are alone’ (Allport 1985, p. 5); it seeks to find explanations to and remedies for the problem in social psychology. The first explanation given is in the concept of mental models, the concept that ‘People usually have some relevant knowledge and beliefs that help them interpret new information to reach conclusions....and that failure to take this into consideration ‘poses a potential stumbling block for climate change communicators’ (p. 3).

The second explanation for the inefficacy of climate communication pertains to ‘framing,’ i.e. ‘the setting of an issue within an appropriate context to achieve the desired interpretation or perspective....to ensure they consciously select a frame that will resonate with their audience’, i.e., whether or not the problem of climate change is framed as ‘geographically and temporally distant’; whether it framed as a goal to increase gains or decrease losses from; whether or not it is framed in a way that integrates the immediate and local impacts with the larger worldwide and future impacts of climate change.

To explain the next reason, the book first speaks of two types of human information processing systems: analytic and experiential information processing systems (p. 15). In analytic information processing, the use of statistics, graphs, and logic to present a message, while the experiential is through vivid imagery and personal account. Climate change communications overly rely on analytic information processing. It is stated that while ‘the experiential processing system is the stronger motivator for action, most climate change communication remains geared towards the analytical processing system’ (p. 16). The book understands that ‘information balanced with both analytic and experiential materials may be more likely to affect attitudes and behavior, creating a desire in people to act on their new knowledge’ (p. 18). Concerning this, it is also pointed out there is a tendency to overuse emotional appeal in climate change messages.

Another shortcoming in climate change communication is the lack of proper discussion of scientific and climate uncertainties, which undermines its credibility, among other things. The above reasonings echo Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals, namely, ethos, pathos, and logos: (Ethos is an appeal to credibility, a means of convincing a reader or listener of the credibility of the speaker/writer, or the credibility of the argument; pathos is an appeal to the emotions of the audience, a means of ‘creating a persuasive argument by evoking an emotional response in the audience/reader’; and logos is an appeal to logic and reason, or persuasion through logical thought, fact, and rationality). The book’s analytic and experiential information processing system coincides with Aristotle’s logos and pathos, respectively, while the ‘Address Scientific and Climate Uncertainties’ section falls under Aristotle’s ethos.

A major drawback the guide finds with climate change communication is that the communication ends with disseminating the message. Climate change communicators should take the next and ensure public engagement with the message and oversee it. The guide is very useful, contributes significantly towards making climate change communication more effective. It establishes the need to develop

the psychology of climate change communication. It lays out clear, easy-to-follow instructions for effective communication, with real-life examples to illustrate the points. Moreover, the guide discusses possible challenges in the implementation of each instruction, and this enables Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public to anticipate the challenges and develop responses. As a guide for effective communication, the book walks the talk in that it is both an informative and pleasant read.

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Gebriel Alazar Tesfatsion is the recipient of the 2018 prestigious Japanese Government (MEXT) Scholarships and a recent graduate of the University of Tsukuba, Japan, with Master of Arts in International Area Studies. His research interest lies in the field of systemic functional linguistics, particularly in the area of transitivity theory. His investigation focuses on how we construe experience or reality in language. Tesfatsion is a member of the Japan Association of Nilo-Ethiopian Studies. He participated in the '2018-2021: Fund for the Promotion of Joint International Research (Fostering Joint International Research (B) "Description and documentation of Ethiopian languages: Towards a social innovation" as a research collaborator, wherein he conducted linguistic fieldwork in Ethiopia and published two research articles. He currently works as an assistant lecturer in the college of business and social sciences in Eritrea. Tesfatsion also has Bachelor of Arts with Great Distinction in English from Eritrea Institute of Technology.