Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies
Volume 15 Number 2
 https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00092_7
Received 31 March 2023; Accepted 24 May 2023

VIEWPOINTS

JOSEP ESPLUGA-TRENC
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

ANA PRADES
Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas, Medioambientales y Tecnológicas – Centro de Investigación Sociotécnica (CIEMAT-CISOT)

Social inequalities in the making sense of climate change narratives

ABSTRACT

In this viewpoint we intend to argue two things. First, that any attempt at effective communication must consider not only the causes and effects of climate change, but also the political measures proposed to address those causes and effects, since both influence public perceptions and behaviours. Second, that it is necessary to better understand the processes by which citizens make sense of climate change, as well as the role that their position in the social structure plays in shaping such perceptions. According to our recent research, the most sceptical or denialist people ignore the problem due to their (perceived) difficulties to change ways of life, and this implies that any attempt to modify this perception should go beyond climate change policies in the strict sense, considering other political measures to compensate these (perceived) deficits and help people to be able to consider a change of ways of life.

KEYWORDS

public perceptions
denialism
concerned people
climate policies
risk communication
way of life

Beyond its impacts on ecosystems and on the whole biosphere, climate change pushes many of our social and political institutions to the limits. The still high margins of uncertainty associated to the study and management of climate change, not only challenges the scientific making of the best possible diagnosis, but it also challenges how it is transmitted and communicated beyond the close circle of experts (those who generate and share the data), towards the public in general and the political sphere in particular. In this viewpoint we intend to argue two things. First, that any attempt at effective communication must consider not only the causes and effects of climate change, but also the political measures proposed to address those causes and effects, since both influence public perceptions and behaviours. Second, that it is necessary to better understand the processes by which citizens make sense of climate change, as well as the role that their position in the social structure plays in shaping such perceptions.

THE WEAK CONSISTENCY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION DATA

Several international institutions are generating plenty of empirical evidence on the public perceptions of climate change through long series of statistical data on attitudes and knowledge on the topic (i.e., data from Eurostat, UN, European Social Survey, etc.). However, the usual gap between the answers the people give to the questionnaires and they practical daily actions is being increasingly acknowledged. For instance, Eurobarometer data shows that in 2021, 78% of the Europeans think that climate change is a very serious problem, while only 7% consider it as a negligible risk, and this seems to be a consolidated trend from more than a couple of decades ago (Eurobarometer 2021). However, according to the same sources, more than 35% admit that they have not taken any measures to combat climate change, which suggests that there is a part of the population that is concerned but does not act to prevent it. According to the IPCC reports, these concerns and willingness to act are not reflected in changes in the environmental indicators (waste production, energy consumption, greenhouse gases emissions, etc.). On the contrary, the environmental evidence (IPCC 2022) keeps worsening and worsening. In fact, one of the great challenges of climate change is how to make visible its relevance and the potential social metamorphoses that it entails for the majority of the population.

DESIGNING NEW AND APPROPRIATELY COMMUNICATED POLICIES

The definition of a risk, such as climate change, entails the need to formulate policies. A thick institutional framework for the elaboration and application of climate change policies has been articulated, generating great impacts on the hegemonic socio-economic models. Through these policies certain chemical products are prohibited, activities that generate greenhouse gases are regulated, low-emission vehicles are subsidized, CO_2 measurement, exchange and trade mechanisms are established, urban heat wave or other extreme atmospheric phenomena adaptation strategies are developed, flood emergency plans are designed and executed, etc.

This type of measures may question the hegemonic socio-economic development models and therefore require strong political willingness and commitment. Political leaders should feel legitimized to do so with the support of a citizenry that perceives that, in principle, these policies seek to promote the common good. However, this is not easy to achieve. On the one hand, the

lobbies that benefit from the socio-economic model within which the problem has been generated, such as corporations linked to the exploitation of fossil fuels, are capable of exerting great pressure on the political system and hinder policy adoption or slow them down to the pace of their interests. On the other hand, citizen pressure is difficult to articulate and materialize. Despite the high scientific consensus on the impacts that climate change entails, these are still difficult to perceive and even to imagine for most of the population in general.

Climate change represents a major challenge in all areas, since unprecedent forms of social cooperation, innovative policies, new technologies, and, above all, new ways of thinking and acting are required to face it. And this is why it is important to focus on public communication.

THE STUDY OF CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION

Mass media are another modern institution challenged by climate change. If, according to current knowledge, climate change can erode the living conditions of many species, including humans, and cause profound impacts on social systems, how can we communicate such a serious problem?

During the first years of the IPCC scientific production, throughout the 1990s, communication focused mainly on the mere transmission of scientific data and the synthesis of expert reports. By that time, scientific conferences, high-level politic meetings, or certain extreme weather events were the topics deserving media coverage (Moser 2010). It was a rather narrow-minded approach, with hardly any reflection on its reception by the public. These types of campaigns sought to educate the population, filling in their information deficits on climate change.

Assuming that the public is unaware of what goes on and, above all, that with more and better training and information they would understand things as the experts would like them to do, is clearly too simplistic. The so-called model of cognitive deficit in risk communication has been fully dismissed by social research on risk as an explanatory variable: the interrelationships between populations and risks are much more complex (Espluga et al. 2009; Prades et al. 2015). Nevertheless, communication strategies in many scientific fields still claim that the key issue is the lack of information as a way of explaining why people do not change their behaviours and ways of life (Ballantyne 2016). Besides, climate change communication, like environmental communication in general, has too often been posed in terms of crisis communication, which has led to a rather instrumental perspective, whose main objective is to resolve crises or emergency situations.

In the research field of the perception and communication of climate change, perspectives based on the assumption that, even if information is available, people do not 'understand' what is happening and therefore do not behave in a 'suitable' way, tend to dominate (Ballantyne 2016). This has led to a growing interest in the public perception of climate change in different geographical and social contexts, trying to measure their attitudes towards risk and to identify factors that influence their behaviours (e.g. ideological factors, values, political preferences, cultural worldviews, etc.). Ideally, this type of research could improve the design of messages, transmit the appropriate recommendations, improve communication to fill the knowledge gap and change attitudes in the population. However, this linear conception of causality between information, attitude and behaviours continues understanding communication as a mere transmission process. Thus, the resulting proposals

would focus on improving the transmission of data, recommendations, orders, etc., renouncing to a more inclusive, deliberative and interactive perspective with the public.

Since climate change is difficult to be perceived and interpreted by many audiences, it is necessary to find more interaction and dialogue to negotiate more intelligible images, metaphors and conceptual models. This is why, in our view, more efforts should be devoted to understand the social processes through which people make sense of the media symbols and narratives of climate change.

MAKING SENSE OF CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS

In recent research we used a deliberative and participatory methodology to study how citizens perceive and interpret the media representations of climate change (Espluga Trenc et al. 2019). The analysis was based on a qualitative sample consisting of two groups (around eight people each one), the first one with citizens concerned of the seriousness of climate change, and the second one with more sceptical people. Both groups interacted through a month-analysis process, combining moments of group and individual reflections, following the Systematic Tool for Behavioural Assumption, Validation and Exploration (STAVE) method, an iterative procedure for exploring people's perceptions and interpretations on sustainability issues in everyday contexts (Espluga et al. 2016; Horlick-Jones and Prades 2014; Prades et al. 2016, 2017). In this way, we could observe how participants elaborated their reasoning about the climate change and the media news on this issue.

The initial attitudes towards climate change of the two groups were quite different: the people in the 'concerned' group highly convinced of the seriousness of the problem, and the 'sceptical' group convinced of the opposite. At the beginning of the deliberative process, both groups relied on the most common stereotypes about climate change to illustrate and defend their starting positions. The most mentioned things by the 'concerned' group were things like 'changing temperatures', 'missing seasons', 'droughts', 'scarcity', 'melting', 'greenhouse effect', 'deforestation', 'biodiversity loss', 'destruction', etc. Participants in the 'sceptical' group expressed much more extreme and polarized concepts, on the one hand with references to catastrophic situations (such as 'destroyed planet', 'much darkness', 'the sun will not exist', 'disaster' and 'horror'), while, on the other hand, questioning the reality of climate change ('alarmism', 'exaggeration', 'it's a montage', 'there have always been catastrophes', etc.). In other words, they expressed a contradictory position and a dissonant discourse, and perhaps that is why they ended up adding a series of terms that expressed a clear individual discomfort with the climate change debate ('selfishness', 'bad education', 'laziness', 'guilty', 'discomfort', 'fear', etc.).

However, as the debate progressed (within each group, as the two groups never meet during the month-duration of the process), the positions of both groups tended to converge, so that their respective initial arguments dissolved during the deliberation process. After several meetings, people in the 'concerned' group ended up relativizing their initial arguments, acknowledging that they could not be sure of what they were saying, questioning their own sources of information, and expressing some of the arguments of the other group (such as appealing to the potential 'natural' nature of the climate change phenomenon). People of the 'sceptical' group ended up admitting that,

despite their initial denialism, they did care and that they agreed with many of the warning messages about climate change.

This is a very relevant finding as it reveals the fragility of the lay reasoning processes and the methodological challenges to properly capture it with public opinion survey data. Evidence from survey on distant and unfamiliar topics can rarely be connected to any practical experience of daily life.

Somehow, people from both groups, 'concerned' and 'sceptical', agree that climate change may be a real problem, but despite its urgency, they perceive that its resolution will take time and that is not a priority neither for themselves nor for the political and economic sectors.

All this generates an internal contradiction difficult to manage, a kind of cognitive dissonance: one thing must be done but other are being done. This could partially explain the fatalism and passivity towards climate change and everything that surrounds it, including the Conference of the Parties (COP) summits, despite the extensive media coverage that usually accompanies them.

CONCERNED AND SCEPTICALS, AN UNEXPECTED DIVIDE

During the group discussions, policies to avoid, minimize or adapt to climate change were also discussed, and it is shown that it is impossible to talk about climate change without also talking about its policies. It is something that is united in the perception of the public, as demonstrated by Wynne's interpretive theories of risk (Wynne 1996). Both groups agreed on the need for public policies, such as investment in renewable energy, promotion of public transport, water and energy saving, and waste reduction. However, they disagreed with the convenience of other policies, such as increasing public awareness and information on climate change, or promoting changes in attitudes and lifestyles. This is a key issue for communication. The 'concerned' group was in favour of informational and behavioural policies, while the 'sceptical' group was totally against them. In this way, through the iterative deliberations and arguments of each group, we were able to observe what really separated both groups.

What seems to differentiate the 'concerned' and the 'sceptical' is their (perceived) possibility (or not) of changing their way of life, rather than their public opinion towards climate change. In other words, the 'concerned' people would be willing to change their way of life (they would accept mitigation and adaptation policies), while the 'sceptical' people would resist changing, either because they would prefer not to do so, by ideological reasons or because even if they wanted to do so, they perceive the transition costs as unaffordable for them.

It should be noted that both groups (in our sample) had a different socio-economic and educational composition: the 'concerned' group with a higher average level of education and employment, and the 'sceptical' group with a lower educational and socio-economic status.

In this sense, we could hypothesize that people with lower socio-economic and educational status will express greater resistance to change and, therefore, greater resistance to openly accept the existence of climate change (since this would lead them to have to have to accept measures they cannot easily put in practice).

Finally, both groups perceive a clear deficit of citizen empowerment to demand measures from governments and companies. However, the 'sceptical'

group feel it is impossible to demand anything to the institutions (because they perceive that nobody will pay attention to them), while the 'concerned' group believe that changes can be demanded (and obtained) from public and private institutions.

This brings the key question of the (perceived) degree of democracy in our societies and our institutions. The 'concerned' people believe democracy can be improved, while sceptics tend to doubt about it. Fatalism and passivity are more present in the 'sceptical' group, than in the 'concerned' one.

According to these results, climate change mitigation and adaptation policies could be more supported by those with sufficient resources (material and cognitive) for a change in their ways of living. On the other hand, those who perceive (realistically or not) that they will not be able to face a change in lifestyles, could be more resistant towards such policies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION

These arguments have profound implications for communication of climate change. On the one hand, it seems clear that the public is fragmented and that communication strategies should take this into account, addressing different messages to the different population groups. There are social groups very reticent to accept information on climate change. On the other hand, the fact that the most sceptical or denialist people ignore the problem due to their (perceived) difficulties to change ways of life, implies that any attempt to modify this perception should consider political measures to compensate these (perceived) deficits. Otherwise, any attempt to give them information will never be enough, probably will be ignored and the attempt to establish communication may even be interpreted by them as manipulation.

As said above, one of the great challenges of climate change is how to make visible its relevance and the potential social metamorphoses that it entails for the majority of the population. The unequal social structures seem to be conditioning public perceptions and public debate, and this become a serious challenge for the communication of the climate change issues, which should overcome these inequalities and give room for increasing the public participation in the definition of the problem and its solutions.

In this context, our argument suggests that the fair distribution of risks and benefits, and how this conditions climate change perception, communication and deliberation, is a fundamental debate which social research on climate change cannot renounce.

FUNDING

This text is partially based in a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, State Program for Scientific and Technical Research of Excellence. Subprogram of Knowledge Generation (G.A. ref. CSO2013-41661-P).

REFERENCES

Ballantyne, A. G. (2016), 'Climate change communication: What can we learn from communication theory?', *WIREs Climate Change*, 7:3, pp. 329–44, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.392.

Espluga, J., Farré, J., Gonzalo, J., Horlick-Jones, T., Prades, A., Oltra, J. and Navajas, J. (2009), 'Do the people exposed to a technological risk always

want more information about it? Some observations on cases of rejection', in S. Martorell, C. Guedes and J. Barnett (eds), *Safety, Reliability and Risk Analysis*, London: CRC Press and Taylor and Francis, pp. 1301–08.

Espluga, J., Konrad, W., Mays, C., Oltra, C., Poumadère, M. and Prades, A. (2016), '"How to address citizens" practices and policies on sustainability? A consultative tool for brokering policy-related knowledge between the worlds of policymaking and everyday citizens' life', *Evidence & Policy*, 12:3, pp. 381–404, http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/174426416X14700777371551.

Espluga Trenc, J. (coord.), Gonzalo, J., Prades, J., Farré, J., Prades, A., Capdevila, A., López, B., Moragas-Fernández, C. and Gómez-Puertas, L. (2019), *El cambio climático y sus metáforas: Cómo dar sentido a las narrativas mediáticas sobre un riesgo global difuso e invisible* ('Climate change and its metaphors: How to make sense of media narratives about a diffuse and invisible global risk'), Barcelona: Icària.

Eurobarometer (2021), *Special Eurobarometer 513: Climate Change: Factsheets Spain*, Brussels: European Commission, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2273. Accessed 31 March 2023.

Horlick-Jones, T. and Prades, A. (2014), 'Translating between social worlds of policy and everyday life: The development of a group-based method to support policy-making by exploring behavioural aspects of sustainable consumption', *Public Understanding of Science*, 24:7, pp. 811–26, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963662514525556.

IPCC (2022), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (eds H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E. S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem and B. Rama), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844.

Moser, S. C. (2010), 'Communicating climate change: History, challenges, process and future directions', *WIREs Climate Change*, 1, pp. 31–53, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.11.

Prades, A., Espluga, J. and Horlick-Jones, T. (2015), 'Riesgos tecnológicos, conflictos sociales y políticas ambientales: Del estudio de las percepciones a la implicación pública' ('Technological risks, social conflicts and environmental policies: From the study of perceptions to public involvement'), *Papers, Revista de Sociologia*, 100:4, pp. 395–423, https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.2223.

Prades, A., Espluga, J. and Horlick-Jones, T. (2017), 'Hybrid focus groups as a means to investigate practical reasoning, learning processes and indigenous activities', in R. S. Barbour and D. L. Morgan (eds), *A New Era of Focus Groups Research. Challenges, Innovation and Practice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 179–204.

Prades, A., Horlick-Jones, T., Barnett, J., Constantin, M., Enander, A., Espluga, J., Konrad, W., Poumadère, M. and Rosenhead, J. (2016), 'Shining a light on citizens' everyday environment-related behaviours', in A. Martinuzzi and M. Sedlacko (eds), *Knowledge Brokerage for Sustainable Development*, London: Routledge, pp. 189–207.

Wynne, B. (1996), 'May the sheep safely graze? A reflexive view of the expert-lay knowledge divide', in S. Lash, B. Szerszynski and B. Wynne (eds), *Risk, Environment and Modernity*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 44–83.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Espluga-Trenc, Josep and Prades, Ana (2023), 'Social inequalities in the making sense of climate change narratives', *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, Special Issue: 'Beyond Climate Change Information: Communicating the Anthropocene', 15:2, pp. 285–92, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00092_7

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Josep Espluga-Trenc, Ph.D. in sociology, is associate professor at the Department of Sociology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), and member of the research group on 'Public policies analysis, management and assessment' at the Institute of Government and Public Policies (IGOP), a scholar's group specialized in the development of participatory methods applied to social research. His research interests focus on the relationships between health, work, environment and territory, with particular attention to the social perception of risks, socioenvironmental conflicts and participatory methods.

Contact: Department of Sociology, Institute of Government and Public Policies (IGOP), Edifici B, Campus de la UAB, Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès) 08193, Spain.
E-mail: joseplluis.espluga@uab.cat

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5058-2411

Ana Prades, Ph.D. in sociology, is head of the Sociotechnical Research Centre (CISOT-CIEMAT), of the Centro de Investigaciones Energéticas, Medioambientales y Tecnológicas (CIEMAT), a public research body assigned to the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, focusing on energy and environment and the technologies related to them. Her research has focused on the field of public risk perception and communication, as well as on instruments for citizen engagement in the context of energy technologies.

Contact: Sociotechnical Research Centre (CISOT-CIEMAT), MRA Building, Campus de la UAB, Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), 08193, Spain.
E-mail: ana.prades@ciemat.es

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2197-5205