

Talking Climate

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From Research to Practice in Public Engagement

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PREFACE

The question of how to communicate about climate change, and build public engagement in high-consuming, carbon-intensive Western nations, has occupied researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, campaigners, and community organisers for more than two decades.

During this time, and mirroring the glacial pace at which international political negotiations have progressed, limited progress has been made. Socially and culturally, climate change remains (for the most part) the preserve of a committed band of activists. The ‘carbon footprints’ of many Western countries – and the citizens of these nations – remain high. The public conversation about the energy system is mainly focused on the costs of household energy bills. Public engagement is stuck in second gear.

Meanwhile, the predictions made by scientists over the past quarter of a century are beginning to come true. Pick any metric – levels of atmospheric CO₂, global average temperatures, ocean acidification, the prevalence and severity of certain types of extreme weather – and it is clear that the climate is changing, with all the risks and dangers this entails for human societies and the natural world. As countless analyses, declarations, and calls to arms have made clear, rapid and radical changes to the social, economic, agricultural, transport, and energy systems of the world are required if the ambition of the UN agreement reached in Paris, in 2015 (to limit levels of global warming to less than 2 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels), is to become a reality. A widespread and sustained shift in public consciousness and engagement is a central part of this challenge.

The purpose of this book is to outline how public engagement with climate change can shift *out* of second gear. There is no lack of relevant academic evidence, but most of it is not connected with the practitioners who can put it to good use. Similarly, campaigners on a whole range of issues have developed a huge amount of learning (often through trial and error), but these lessons are not consistently applied, and climate change continues to remain trapped in the ‘green ghetto’.

In this book we offer a practically oriented evidence base for why (and how) practitioners could do things differently. The pieces of the puzzle already exist to make this happen – in academic research and practitioner expertise – but a coherent new agenda for public engagement is required to make these pieces fit together. The five principles outlined in this book offer a fresh approach to a familiar problem. By spanning the full width of the space between primary academic research and applied practitioner strategies, we hope the book will be relevant for academics, educators, campaigners, and communicators.

This book does not contain a prescriptive set of rules or a ‘how to’ guide for running the perfect climate change or energy campaign. What it offers is a set of principles, all grounded in academic evidence, that together form a fresh approach to public engagement, providing a platform on which individual initiatives and campaigns can be built:

Principle 1: Learn lessons from previous campaigns, and be prepared to test assumptions.

Principle 2: Public engagement should start from the ‘values-up’ not from the ‘numbers-down’.

Principle 3: Tell new stories to shift climate change from a scientific to a social reality.

Principle 4: Shift from ‘nudge’ to ‘think’ to build climate citizenship.

Principle 5: Promote new voices to reach beyond the usual suspects.

These five principles are described in detail in subsequent chapters, alongside a proposal for a fresh approach to widen and deepen public engagement, as well as suggestions for how we would know that the approach was ‘working’.

Our societal response to climate change is not something that will be ‘solved’ in a generation: the question of how we should live in a climate-changed world is one that will be relevant and essential for centuries to come. So although time is clearly of the essence, effective public

engagement is not something that can happen overnight or by focusing on ‘quick wins’ at the expense of a more holistic understanding of the challenge.

But a robust foundation of public engagement and dialogue can ensure something more important than quick wins: a level of ‘climate citizenship’ that locks in the stuttering technological, economic, and political progress where the ‘big wins’ are to be found. From the uptake of energy-saving technologies, to the mandate offered to national leaders, to the social momentum behind new initiatives like fossil fuel ‘divestment’, public engagement underpins it all.

It follows that we should invest in public engagement on climate change in the same way that we invest in every other dimension of the challenge of decarbonisation. This book offers the principles that can catalyse public engagement and the promise of shifting the climate change discourse out of the margins and into the mainstream. It is time to start talking climate.

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