

LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW WE TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE



How can we talk more effectively to people outside our professional circles about the climate crisis? **Freya Roberts** explains how to have conversations that empower our friends and loved-ones to act



Don't Look Up shows how scientists struggle to communicate risk

COP26 was a proud moment for the science community and, on balance, not a terrible moment for our policymakers. However, influencing policy decisions is only one piece of the puzzle scientists face. Getting the public to act on climate change is also essential to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

When we talk about things like “a 2°C target” or “keeping within our carbon budget”, we’re talking about how to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

People working in the science and policy communities understand these phrases intuitively. But these concepts can seem abstract to people outside our work bubbles. To people like my sister, or my best friend.



UK climate-advisory body the Climate Change Committee estimates that around two-thirds of the emissions reductions we need to reach net zero involve the public, through either behavioural or societal changes. So how experts talk to the public about climate change really does matter: we collectively have a massive part to play.

But how well-equipped are we, as experienced climate scientists, to meet this communication challenge?

Being scientifically literate and being able to talk about climate to encourage people to act can be two very different things. Simply stating the facts can prompt people to respond in ways that are unhelpful, psychologically. People’s reactions can range from fear and hopelessness to disinterest or defensiveness.

The UCL Climate Action Unit interrogates why – from perspectives of psychology and neuroscience – climate communications fails to motivate action. It has some really useful, practical tips on how to communicate better with policymakers and the public too; it’s all about how we connect.

INSIGHT: LOST IN TRANSLATION

The terminology we use can complicate communication with people outside our professional groups. Climate scientists provide rigorous definitions for words to try to avoid misunderstandings. Yet the words and phrases we use can mean very different things to people outside our professional spheres.

After the 2021 IPCC report was released, a team surveyed members of the public to see how well they understood the terms scientists had used.

Some phrases, like carbon neutral, were simply difficult to grasp. Others, such as adaptation, seemed clearer – except participants weren’t sure how to apply them to climate change. One participant explained adaptation as “books that are made into movies”.

This is the deeper problem with definitions. Abstract climate terms can mean different things to different groups of people.

It’s especially challenging when we can’t point to a physical object to calibrate a mutual understanding. What will +2°C of global warming look and feel like? Will an English summer feel like Barcelona in April?

People fall back on what they understand a word to mean, often in a non-climate context. All of us default to our prior associations time and time again, even when given a scientific definition.

The result is that what experts think they have said may not be what the public hears. To communicate climate risks more effectively, we must spot these potentially confusing terms and use more evocative, descriptive language.

INSIGHT: ABSTRACT RISKS

Many people, especially avid weather watchers, will have heard phrases like “a one-in-100-year storm” on the news.

Unless you’ve been directly affected by such a storm, however, the words don’t evoke much feeling. And so, for much of the general public, phrases we use to describe worsening climate risks don’t ring alarm bells.

For me it’s a different experience. When I hear that a one-in-100-year storm is becoming a one-in-50-year event, I visualise flooded high streets and houses stripped of their roofs. I feel desperation for people who will lose power and heating.

Why do we respond so differently to the same words?

To understand this, we have to understand the human brain. We think in two different ways; intuitive thinking, and deliberative reasoning. The book *Thinking Fast and Slow* has described this as system one and system two thinking.

You might assume that when presented with facts about climate risk people consider the information and choose consciously how to respond. But for most of us it is the brain’s autopilot mode that determines how we respond to that information.

In fact, we do way more autopilot decision making – across all aspects of our lives – than we’d like to admit.

How does this insight help climate scientists to talk to the public? It tells us that to persuade people to act on climate change we must help them to get it, intuitively.

That means relating climate risks to things people already care about; the rising cost of home insurance as flood risks increase, or more expensive grocery bills as more extreme weather impacts agriculture.

INSIGHT: FEAR CAN PARALYSE US

Knowing the facts is not enough to drive

the public to act. Being warned a threat is coming without knowing what to do about it can trigger the opposite of action; it can lead to denial, fear and paralysis.

Yes, fear can motivate some people to change their behaviour – but only if we present risks with recommended actions that feel concrete, effective, and achievable. It also only really works when we feel strongly about the climate issue.

This brain insight reveals something else interesting: perhaps raising public awareness of climate risks isn't the solution to the climate crisis. It's not about addressing an information deficit; it's about people's lack of agency – knowing how to act on that information.

Climate scientists may feel uncomfortable with this assertion. As professionals, researching the risks we face gives us the knowledge that professionals and decision makers need. But for most people, it's enough to get the general picture – that human-caused emissions threaten life on earth. We know enough to know that we need to act. The question instead, for most people, is how we act.

The take-home message for communicators? Use fear messaging cautiously; and always highlight what actions people can take and how to do it. Don't leave people hopeless or despondent.

INSIGHT: LEADING BY EXAMPLE

So let's assume the public knows enough to know they need to act. Let's say there is an appetite for action. What's going to motivate people to act?

Action stories are a powerful tool for communicators. As Climate Action Unit neuroscientist Kris De Meyer explains: "Our brains are optimised to understand stories of other people doing stuff. They're not optimised to understand stories of abstract things happening at a planetary scale."

When we hear stories about people taking positive action on climate change, we may find we all want a piece of that pie. This process of learning from one another is called social learning – and it has huge potential to reduce emissions.

Even better, if you're part of a group that shares a passion you become better at tackling challenges by learning from each other as a community.

The action stories that resonate with

THE DOS AND DON'TS OF CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS

POST COP26, post another IPCC report, many of us have felt exhausted. Many of us may feel that we've done enough now.

Take time. Recharge your batteries. But can I invite you to consider a new thought? Perhaps it's on us to get our messages across more effectively, not to wonder why so many people haven't got it yet.

Here are some suggestions:

DO

- Give examples of changes people have made and explain how they did it
- Relate climate risks to things we all care about – our homes, security, cost of living
- Present stories about how other people have taken positive climate action
- Explain what you mean when you use complicated or scientific terms

DON'T

- Use complex terminology that people may misunderstand
- Try to scare people: it can lead to denial, despair and paralysis
- Try to convince people with facts; connect with people's intuitive decision-making brain instead
- Rely on 'raising awareness' to motivate people to act



us most often centre around a common place, such as where people live, or on a practice people share, such as looking after their homes and gardens. What's more, once we are inspired by others to act, we often persuade ourselves to take more climate-positive steps. As one

action leads to another, this process of self-persuasion can also lead us to engage with the issue more deeply and develop a greater sense of agency.

ADJUSTING OUR MESSAGES

As climate experts, we want our research to benefit society. We study climate risks to work out how to respond to and prevent them. Our work in the Climate Action Unit proves that by applying insights like these, we can empower people to act.

And don't we need all the tools we can get? •

Freya Roberts is a climate-risk communications Fellow of the COP26 Universities Network. She is a project manager with the UCL Climate Action Unit. Connect with Freya on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/freya-roberts-44929347](https://www.linkedin.com/in/freya-roberts-44929347)

FIND OUT MORE

The Climate Action Unit works to change how scientists, policymakers, businesses and the media engage with each other about climate change. Its goal is to use climate-risk information more effectively to drive decisions to curb climate change.

Website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/climate-action-unit>

Twitter: @UCL_CAU

Email: climateactionunit@ucl.ac.uk