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Carly A. Phillips

Union of Concerned Scientists

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Authors Make Case That Climate Change Is Not An Environmental But A Human Problem

**Reviewed by Carly A. Phillips
Union of Concerned Scientists**

Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke (2016), *Talking Climate: From Research to Practice in Public Engagement*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 146 pages. ISBN: 978-3-319-83576-1.

Climate change is one of the greatest threats facing our world today. From rising sea levels to drought to extreme weather, we are already feeling the impacts of greenhouse gas pollution in our world. Humans are responsible for most of these emissions, and we are continuing to pollute at climate-altering rates. As a climate change ecologist, my research forces the devastating consequences of climate change to feel ever-present. I have seen permafrost failures, driven through massive wildfires, and watched as extreme weather inundates our cities and homes. Despite the clear risks associated with climate change, both scientists and organizers have failed to engage the public and communicate the severity and urgency of this issue. We have further failed to engage our communities around meaningful and transformative action that can temper the devastating consequences of climate change. Without improved engagement around the causes, risks, and possible solutions to climate change, we may miss the opportunity to take meaningful climate action and avoid disastrous climate impacts.

In *Talking Climate: From Research to Practice in Public Engagement*, Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke lay out five principles to enhance the efficacy of public engagement and climate change communication. These principles, although not meant to serve as a practitioner's guide, seek to rectify some of the most common pitfalls that scientists and organizers encounter when engaging the public around climate change. In their most distilled form, their guidelines are:

1. Learn lessons from previous campaign
2. Lead with values down not numbers up
3. Shift from a scientific to social reality
4. Change from nudge to thin
5. Promote new voices

Most importantly, each of these principles emphasizes that climate change is not an

environmental problem, but a human one. By focusing on the human element of climate change and the role of interpersonal relationships in engagement, *Talking Climate* provides an evidence-based approach for engaging in meaningful climate communication and action.

The first of their guiding principles, "learn lessons from previous campaigns," places climate change in the context of other large-scale social movements that required broad scale public engagement to inspire action. From the HIV/AIDS epidemic to smoking to vaccines, the authors draw parallels between climate issues and social issues that similarly exposed large groups of people to avoidable harm. They focused on the ineffective role of fearmongering in these campaigns and the often counterproductive outcomes. Specifically, they addressed how fear-based messaging can paralyze the intended audience and encourage apathy instead of action. In addition, the authors highlight that one of the main lessons from the pro-vaccination campaign was that facts don't change people's minds. The authors use this as motivation for the second of their guiding principles, "lead with values, not numbers." This principle encourages those on the frontlines of climate engagement to lead, not with jargon, data, and facts, but rather by appealing to an individual's or communities' values. One prime example provided is the perhaps misguided emphasis on 2°C in the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, which lacked any connection to larger values. For many scientists, this number, which represents a global average temperature increase, serves as an important threshold, above which many of the most dire predictions about climate change will come to fruition. However, for many in the general public, 2°C seems insignificant and far below the temperature fluctuations that are experienced daily. As such, the messaging around this summit and accord failed to engage the general public or create sustained participation around climate issues.

Building on the first two principles, Corner and Clarke's third principle encourages a narrative framing of climate issues to help shift climate change "from a scientific to social reality." The science specific framing of climate change overlooks the human element and importantly doesn't allow individuals and communities to see themselves as part of the climate conversation. Further, as the authors address in their fourth principle "from nudge to think," narrative framing also allows for an important shift from passive to active participation when it comes to both climate impacts and solutions. One of the most challenging aspects of climate engagement is encouraging individuals to interrogate their own lives to determine how they can minimize their personal greenhouse gas emissions. The predominant approach to these behavior changes comes in the form of nudges, where passive changes take a choice out of the hands of the consumer, for example changing the default option for electricity to renewable energy, or most recently, making plastic straws available only upon request. While these are effective for small scale actions, they are somewhat prescriptive in their framing of what makes a "climate forward" or "green" lifestyle change. Narrative framing creates an opportunity for individuals to not just be nudged into climate action, but allows them to evaluate and reflect on their own lifestyle and work toward transformative (i.e., low carbon) and not merely performative climate action.

Beyond values, narrative framing, and personal reflection, *Talking Climate* also emphasizes the importance of diverse voices and coalitions for effective climate engagement. Green movements have a reputation for homogeneity and are specifically dominated by wealthy, white individuals. While these people and groups have reached important milestones in the broader fight against climate change, they are not representative of who has and will be most impacted by climate change. Importantly, new voices in the fight against climate change will help accelerate its acceptance as a social, not just scientific, reality, and reach groups who may not have been included in conversations about solutions previously.

While the principles put forth in *Talking Climate* are an important jumping off point for enhanced climate communication, the larger environment in which this engagement takes place has changed drastically since the book was published. Corner and Clarke lead one of Europe's premiere climate change communication organizations and wrote *Talking Climate* as the Paris Climate Accord was beginning to be ratified by nations across the world. Since that time, populist attitudes have taken root across the world. The United States pulled out of the Paris Accord, and the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a special report emphasizing the short (less than two decades) timeline in which meaningful climate action must occur. As a U.S. citizen and resident, it's also challenging to think about climate engagement without first considering how the current administration changed this conversation. Although climate change was already a polarizing issue in the United States, the rhetoric used and actions taken by the Trump administration exacerbated this divide. Such changes, both internationally and within the U.S., underscore the urgency of climate engagement and highlight the specific importance of narrative framing and broad-based coalitions.

Talking Climate: From Research to Practice in Public Engagement provides a timely synthesis from which researchers, teachers, organizers, and politicians alike can all benefit. Researchers may discover new ways to frame their own work around climate issues while teachers may find different strategies for engaging their students. As a whole, Corner and Clarke created a manual that can lead not only to improved engagement around climate issues but also toward meaningful climate action.

About the Reviewer

Carly Phillips is a Kendall Science Fellow at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Massachusetts.