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# The Psychology and Communication of Climate Change Ignorance

**Reviewed by  
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George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Bloomsbury USA, 2014, 272 pages. ISBN: 9781632861023

Climate change is the most challenging issue facing humanity. Why then is “the collective social norm of silence” the most pervasive narrative around it (Marshall, 2015, p. 3)? Author George Marshall, founder of the Climate Outreach and Information Network, draws on 25 years’ experience in environmental work to try and explain why we as a species ignore, downplay, and sometimes refute the existence of an issue he equates to nuclear war. *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, is an accessible book, weaving scientific fact together with media analysis, interviews, and political assessment in an attempt to inform readers on how climate change has been miscommunicated. Marshall’s 42 total chapters are 3 to 8 pages in length, injected with enjoyable banter, personal quips, and popular culture references throughout. This book would make a fine entry point for readers who are new to the science of climate change.

The book is broken into three sections. The first section focuses on the individual experience with climate change and brings real-world examples of people ignoring it. Natural disasters are often viewed as separate from climate change by both the media and decisionmakers. These opening chapters frame climate change as an issue that is deliberately ignored for more important matters like hurricane recovery or individual freedoms. Climate change is identified in these early chapters as being infected with social and cultural meaning and is made divisive through in-group and out-group language. The general public is often forced to choose a side through what is called the language of we, where groups on both sides of the issue seek to recognize supporters and draw them into their identity politics. The first section closes with a discussion on how scientists try to provide evidence-based research that speaks to the issue without politicizing it. The lack of a clear and consistent enemy within that research is problematic for media outlets

trying to form a story for sensational news. According to former senior BBC correspondent Mark Brayne, journalism needs “a narrative of baddies and goodies” alongside events with traceable causes (Marshall, 2015, p. 39). Climate change research does not fit within these requirements, but worse yet, the would-be viewers are almost certainly the baddies.

Section two delves into research on behavioral psychology, adding to the reader’s understanding of climate science by explaining the forces influencing how individuals perceive an issue of this magnitude, but distance it in terms of physical separation and timelines. Some chapters speak to our ability to comprehend, analyze, and respond to information, while others address our need for a narrative and a level of immediacy. Climate change advocates often speak to the data and struggle with creating or identifying a narrative, while opponents first appeal to emotions and then seek data to support their claims. The difficulty is further compounded by how people perceive risk. When people think of climate change, they think of natural disasters, which they are incapable of preventing and are therefore largely unwilling to mobilize against.

Climate change is also referred to in this section as a creeping problem, which is explained as one without a defined beginning, end, or any sort of deadline for resolution. This definition is not entirely congruent with the literature, wherein the Industrial Revolution is often recognized as the beginning of climate change (Solomon, Qin, Manning, Marquis, Averyt, Tignor, Miller, Jr., & Chen). The last chapters of this section shift from explaining what has been said about climate change to what has been left out of the conversation. Marshall harkens back to one of his opening points on the non-narrative of collective silence and frames climate change as a wicked problem, being one of immense complexity, contradiction, and constant change.

The third and final section focuses on how climate science is communicated. Influence on the language around climate change is critical, especially when it is time to engage people and communities to deal with the issue. Marshall states that climate change is framed as an issue that can be resolved, overcome, or defeated, instead of the ongoing and irreversible problem the scientific community knows it to be. His focus then transitions to the messengers, briefly discussing how Al Gore has been used as a proverbial punching bag and how even the International Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) has been forced to quell the language used in its reports. The IPCC uses the term very likely in their reporting to signify a chance greater than 90%, but lay readers guessed the term to signify percentages far lower even with IPCC definitions at hand. In a discussion on why climate science does not spur people into action, Australian academic Clive Hamilton says that “denial is due to a surplus of culture rather than a deficit of information” (Marshall, 2015, p. 124). By keeping their language balanced and relying on the data to prove the point, climate scientists fail to tell a story that would engage, excite, and inspire the general public. More important than creating a narrative, however, is creating a salient narrative. The general public is very familiar with the notion of melting ice caps and disappearing polar bears, but climate change cannot be made a local issue using arctic imagery and an animal whose cultural relevance is, for some, related to seasonal Coca-Cola commercials (Grossman, 1997). Without a convincing narrative, scientific discourse has turned into a battle of wits where cleverness and humor win over evidence and scientific rigor. Marshall underlines the complexity surrounding celebrity endorsements including those seen at Live Earth, a would-be earth-changing event whose grand conclusion devolved into a series of small lifestyle changes such as maintaining vehicle tire inflation or changing a few light bulbs. These events do not lead to community engagement and real changes.

Marshall suggests that climate change policy needs to address the companies that refine fossil fuels instead of focusing solely on individuals who use the products. He cites the need for a coherent policy that acknowledges shared participation between individuals, governments, and businesses, whether that be a carbon tax or another form of financial tool. The desire to act

on climate change can be impeded by a number of factors such as air travel habits, and relates this as a cognitive dissonance, alternatively known as the attitude-behavior gap (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000). They cite the futility of changing individual lifestyles when a societal shift is needed. The last few chapters compare the belief in climate change to the generalized practice of holding religious beliefs and show how religions succeed due to the strength of their networks and the value in attending formal gatherings with like-minded individuals. Religious belief and climate change share a cognitive struggle, in that the believer must accept something they cannot see. Religion embodies the sort of long-term generational thinking that climate change advocates are desperately trying to instill. Marshall concludes by summarizing the book across two final chapters, refocusing on the need for a climate change narrative, conviction among supporters, and importance of stressing common values and beliefs. He then also provides a brief explanation of what happens when annual planetary temperatures rise four degrees Celsius beyond preindustrial levels, discussing some of the data while elaborating on the impacts to the planet and to all of humanity.

Marshall’s writing format is made immediately apparent and is nearly formulaic throughout the remainder of the book. He presents the issue, provides a viewpoint from an interviewee, and either supports it or refutes it with evidence. Marshall does diverge from his own path in Chapter 8, a two-and-a-half-page attack on Myron Ebell, identified as the director of libertarian think-tank the Competitive Enterprise Institute and infamous enemy to the climate change community. Though the vitriol is well-deserved, the chapter is written in a tone that is markedly petty and serves to undermine the following chapter on narratives in climate science.

Marshall plays the roles of interviewer, researcher, political commentator, and behavior analyst, all through the lens of a career climate researcher and communications expert. A visit to the author’s personal website (climatedenial.org) listed on the back cover of the book, and the online location of the reference list (climateconviction.org) reveals pages that are long out of date and do not serve to further the importance of effective communication, which is a main tenet of the book. This type of pitfall,

wherein a person actively performs the thing they warn against doing, is actually discussed toward the end of the book in terms of climate scientists trying to justify their unnecessary use of air travel. Given his writing style and penchant for amusing situations, the irony would certainly not be lost on Marshall. For anyone interested in trying to convince a community where deniers are very common, this book can be a good learning manual to understand where to start in engaging such communities.

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