

Chapter 11

Communicating for sustainable climate policy

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The previous chapters have critically examined climate change communication in a variety of venues, searching for signs of life in the politics of climate change. They have identified and explored varying forms of critique and contestation that challenge the status quo. Each one demonstrates in multiple ways that communication not only provides a channel for exchanging information and meaning, but also how it constitutes possibilities for climate change politics. Here, we briefly summarize the main points made in chapters two through ten, and then suggest potential opportunities for connections between citizen communication and climate change politics.

Citizen communication about climate change often remains within the limits of existing institutional structures, and focuses on individual lifestyle choices. Chapters two, three, and four focused on individual behaviors, and examined the potential for persuading people to change those behaviors. In chapter two, Ryghaug and Næss examined multiple ways that climate change and people's perceived powerlessness to solve it are discursively organized and (re)negotiated in the domestic context of daily life. They show how understandings of climate change and of climate change politics develop out of relations between media discourses, political discourses and mundane living conditions. They noted that apparent contradictions between the alleged urgency of the problem and obvious political inaction regarding climate change encourage political disengagement among Norwegian citizens.

Schweizer and Thompson examined possibilities for encouraging behavior change among U.S. citizens, focusing on the US National Park Service's largely unrealized opportunities to

communicate information about climate change to a relatively friendly audience. They examined climate change messages developed and disseminated by the US National Park Service, and suggested how a persuasive campaign that meshed with cultural values and beliefs of park visitors could encourage more climate friendly behaviors, including public pressure on political leaders. Despite Schweizer and Thompson's optimistic outlook, however, climate change is so spatially and temporally vast that the limitations of individual behavior change seem daunting. Further, both of these analyses seem predicated on an assumption that climate policy will follow changes in public opinion and that individual behavior change can make important contributions to climate change mitigation. This seems somewhat naïve, given that, as noted in chapter one, polls have long indicated that a majority of the public (across multiple nations) thinks climate change is a serious problem. Despite these results, few nations have developed and implemented strong climate policies.

Where Schweizer and Thompson discussed the potential for materializing climate change through guided experience with natural features, Hughes explored another technique for communicating climate change. She examined how filmmakers have materialized this otherwise abstract concept through soaring landscape images. Hughes suggested that, by reconstituting climate change through the eye of high angle extreme long shots, filmmakers provide a space where individuals can experience the immediacy of climate change without reducing it to something that can be remediated by switching to fluorescent lightbulbs. Although Hughes' references to strategic communication also imply a social marketing approach to public engagement, her analysis focused on constitutive, rather than instrumental, dimensions of communication. Along with Ryghaug and Naess, she noted that media discourses have the potential to reconstitute climate change for large numbers of the public. How those new meanings translate into policy or significant civic mobilization, however, remains uncertain. Further, she noted that, while targeting different audiences, the films she analyzed locate the potential for change outside the traditionally recognized corridors of political power. In fact, given its pairing of precisely honed data alongside of emotionally sublime images, the cinematic use of extreme long shots may offer an iconic example of agonistic politics.

Chapters five, six and seven shift attention to public participation in climate change politics.

They demonstrate concern with how established institutional mechanisms enable (or disable) various publics to voice opinion, perspective, and interest in hopes of improving climate change policy. They also looked at different pathways to communicate and enact public participation. Carvalho and Gupta's analysis of communication reports submitted by signatories of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) shifts attention to the more formally recognized political realm. For this analysis they adopted Dietz and Stern's (2008) traditionalist definition of public participation as "organized processes adopted by elected officials, government agencies, or other public- or private-sector organizations to engage the public" (p. 1). They showed that states have been refuting their commitments towards promoting public participation in climate politics and construct citizens as recipients of information rather than political subjects. The extent to which public participation in policy processes may help bring about appropriate climate change policies is unknown. Nevertheless, it is plausible that civic input into governmental decision-making and dialogical mechanisms between state and society would produce acceptance for the policy measures required to address climate change. Carvalho and Gupta's analysis of six country cases showed that by excluding references to the topic in their official reports, governments turn public participation into a political non-issue.

In chapter six, Jönsson demonstrated how social media have enabled citizens to develop alternative forms of governance. Jönsson joins other media scholars who credit the Internet with a revival of democracy by highlighting its role in social mobilization (e.g. Atton, 2004; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007). Yet we remain skeptical of claims that the Internet alone will bring us closer to strong democracy. Despite recognition of digital divides such as those along age, gender and income lines, Jönsson made a persuasive case for Facebook and Second Life as epicenters for a new, transnational deliberative politics that has the potential to influence national and international policy. Rather than assuming that social media automatically enables more and better political participation, this chapter argued that social media provide different venues for dissent, including some that are less risky than embodied protest. For example, participation in Facebook and Second Life allow citizens to put forth ideas in an editorial-like form without the spatial and temporal constraints of embodied

protest, and to do so within a context where they can control how much personally identifying information to divulge.

In chapter seven, Feldpausch-Parker et al. examined 350.org, a climate change NGO that had hoped to influence international climate policy via the Copenhagen Accords. The organization's stated goal, of influencing international climate policy, fits neatly within the framework of deliberative democracy. Both central campaign coordinators and local event organizers had hoped to influence the policy-making process. However, the notion that a motley band of students, local community activists, and other "ordinary" citizens could organize a global set of events is decidedly non-traditional. They were not averse to using conventional political channels when available, and, as with the participants in *Second Life*, they used the Internet to orchestrate resistance to official inaction on climate change. By weaving Internet and embodied action together, they attempted to mobilize political resources and heighten official recognition that climate change demanded radically new policies. Their nonconformist positioning gives the initiative an element of agonistic politics.

In chapter eight, Polli shifted the focus from direct participation in existing bureaucratic mechanisms for developing climate policy by exploring ways that activist art can promote agonistic pluralism. She argued that techno-managerial constructs such as emissions markets and carbon trading further ingrain traditional responses, which have led to the current debacle. She lamented the fact that, in a world where everything has been privatized, politics has become an empty signifier. Offering art as a powerful curative to the political malaise associated with modification of the atmosphere, Polli described how it can destabilize hegemonic understandings of earth systems, including those associated with climate change. Polli's artists mobilize political resources to foment the dissensus needed to give voice to those who have been silenced by current political hierarchies and her analysis moved from a focus on public participation within established venues to an exploration of grassroots political mobilization.

In chapter nine, Gunster examined how alternative media contribute to an agonistic politics by framing the politics of climate change differently from mainstream media. As Gunster noted, the media produce, and disseminate multiple, sometimes conflicting discourses on climate change. By providing spaces where readers and viewers can confront

disparities between knowledge, values and power that mainstream media often gloss over, alternative media facilitate public confrontation with currently hegemonic projects and highlight their influence over climate change policy. Scandrett et al. followed Gunster's media analysis by characterizing current climate change communication as an exclusionary process that silences the voices of large segments of society. They demonstrated how the political dimensions of climate policy clearly emerge as issues of class and social justice. They argued that a radically democratic climate politics could be constituted via particular forms of communication, education, and social relations. Their conclusions suggest that communication can provide the beginnings of a response to Bullard, Johnson, and Torres' (2005) claim that "as we search for ways to rectify global climate change, we desperately need the input of the populations most likely to be negatively affected: people of color and other poor people in the North and in the developing countries of the South" (p. 292).

Scandrett et al noted that constituting a climate politics that extends beyond the elite segments of society that have thus far controlled the issue requires a radical reorientation that must include the possibility of direct confrontation needed for development of an agonistic politics on climate change. According to the International Climate Justice Network (2002), "[t]he biggest injustice of climate change is that the hardest hit are the least responsible for contributing to the problem" (n.p.). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007) indicated further that there is a growing climate divide between rich and poor communities regarding both where the effects of climate change are/will be the most acute and who are best prepared to address these effects, partially because "poor communities . . . tend to have more limited adaptive capacities, and are more dependent on climate-sensitive resources such as local water and food supplies" (p. 8). Put simply, those in under-resourced communities have neither the luxury of importing costly supplies, nor of leaving an area that is experiencing the effects of climate change. The Bali Principles of Climate Justice (2002) state that "unsustainable production and consumption practices are at the root of this [climate change] and other global environmental problem[s]" and "combating climate change must entail profound shifts from unsustainable production, consumption and lifestyles, with industrialized countries taking the lead" (n. p.). Moreover, these principles also define climate justice means that all people have access to necessities such as sustainable energy. This

means radical transformation. Only radical, structural changes will enable such access, and those changes will not come without political clash.

Through multiple case studies, this book has highlighted the constitutive relations between communication and different modes of political engagement with climate change. While social marketing and public participation in institutionalized politics will continue to play leading roles in the politics of climate change, assuming that climate policy will follow changes in public opinion is unfounded, given that polls cited by several authors in this book have long indicated that a majority of the public worldwide is concerned with climate change but few countries have put significant climate policies in place. The fundamental transformations that are needed can only come about through the third mode of engagement introduced in the first chapter: agonistic pluralism. Countering the depoliticization of prevailing techno-managerial solutions and opening up new policy possibilities for climate change requires a radicalization of democratic politics.

In the first chapter, we defined *the political* as engagement with processes of debate and decision-making on collective issues where different values, preferences and ideals are played out and opposed. At a basic level, we have to consider that people's political subjectivities determine their orientations to democratic participation. As mediated political communication predominantly constitutes citizens into passive consumers (e.g. Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen & Inthorn, 2004) a transformative process of emancipation is needed to enable the political dimensions of public life to emerge. This transformation demands the creation of spaces for marginalized voices in both mainstream and alternative media, as well as in other communication spaces, where dissent, rather than consensus, is normalized. Such recognition could contribute to further civic mobilization, to engagement with social movements and to incorporation of diverse views in political parties, amongst other political developments.

Political identities are not fixed, but are relational and fluid. Rather than looking at citizenship as a legal status, Asen (2004) views it as a process, hence open-ended and variable in its expressions. Noting that what matters is how people *enact* citizenship, he speaks of "fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments of citizenship in a multiple public sphere." (p. 191). Mouffe's rejection of essentialism in relation to political identities is

consistent with Asen's process-oriented perspective, and maintains that political identities emerge from the "contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation" (1993/2005: 7). The analyses in this book offer diverse contributions to rethinking citizenship regarding climate politics and the role of communication practices in promoting or hindering different forms of political engagement. Multiple tensions associated with perceived lack of citizen agency emerge in the first chapter and elsewhere. Remarkably, however, despite existing barriers to politically relevant participation, several of the analyses indicate that citizens (individually and in organized groups) have been finding ways to relate to climate change that circumvent these limitations or enhance their agency and political efficacy, and that communication matters in those processes.

New information and communication technologies, and especially the Internet, offer an important potential to remake the political. In fact, many have hailed their role in the mobilization of social movements and the development of political activism (e.g. Atton, 2004; Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007). But appraisal of Internet politics is extremely variable, with excited optimism coexisting with profound disillusionment. While some praise its transformation of the modes of social organization and political decision-making, others point to the reproduction of capitalist logics and structures and to the dominance of meaningless content on the Web. Despite taking a critical standpoint of the "corporate and mainstream forms and uses of technology", Kahn and Kellner (2005: 76) argue that information and communications technologies "have facilitated oppositional cultural and political movements and provided possibilities for the sort of progressive socio-political change and struggle that is an important dimension of contemporary cultural politics."(ibid.) They find political action opportunities in the integration of new modes of political activism, alternative forms of agency and oppositional struggle via the Internet.

For example, 350.org began with the lofty goal of influencing international climate policy through the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the UNFCCC in Copenhagen (December 2009). The group was part of an extensive social movement that developed around the goal of achieving an ambitious international agreement to curb greenhouse gas emissions. As Feldpausch-Parker noted in chapter seven, COP 15 was a severe disappointment to those seeking strong international climate policy. Yet, 350.org has not lost

its momentum. Since the October 2009 rallies leading up to COP 15, 350.org has coordinated 14 additional campaigns with another seven campaigns in the planning stages. Furthermore, they have expanded to include other projects targeting public policies that directly impact climate change, such as energy development. Recent campaigns include “Put Solar on It,” “Tar Sands Action – Stop the Keystone Pipeline,” “Don’t Frack the Delaware!” and “The 99% Spring” in addition to their continued climate action days. They claimed a direct influence on the Obama Administration’s decision to deny a permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, which was slated to stretch from Alberta, Canada to refineries in Texas, U.S. On 6 November 2011, the Keystone Pipeline project mobilized participants for an image event that included encircling “the whole White House in an act of solemn protest” (350.org, 2012). With attention drawn to the project, pipeline opponents were able to counter proponents’ claims that the pipeline would further energy security by making more North American oil available to U.S. consumers. As public awareness that the tar sands were slated to be piped to Texas for refining because the finished product was intended for foreign export built, political leaders began to question what had seemed to be a done deal. Bill McKibben, 350.org’s default spokesperson responded to Obama’s decision: “We’ve won no permanent victory (environmentalists never do) but we have shown that spirited people can bring science back to the fore. Blocking one pipeline was never going to stop global warming—but it is a real start, one of the first times in the two-decade fight over climate change when the fossil fuel lobby has actually lost” (350.org, 2012).

Researchers who study phenomena that have demonstrable policy implications do not have the luxury of pursuing their research in neutral isolation. Industry, environmental NGOs, consumer advocates, and others will dissect research publications on climate science in the hope of finding a sentence or two that can be used to justify predetermined policy proposals. Those proposals may or may not be consistent with the findings or conclusions reached in any given paper. Perhaps this is one reason why some climate scientists have been willing to reach beyond their disciplinary expertise, into the policy arena. Although James Hansen’s claims regarding the biophysical components of climate change are consistent with current scientific consensus, his activism has caused discomfort among other climate scientists, who worry that his activities could sully the integrity of science. Even when

referring to one of Hansen's recent publications in the prestigious Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, a colleague responded that, "this isn't a serious science paper. . . . It's mainly about perception as indicated by the paper's title. Perception is not a science" (Gillis, 2012). Although we agree that perception is not a science, neither is climate change. The systematic study of either phenomenon, however, is a science. And perceptions of climate change constitute whatever political action is eventually enacted. If we assume that continued human life on Earth is a good thing, and that justice for all humans is worth seeking, then the way we make the move between climate science and climate policy matters. Climate change communication mediates that move, for better or worse, and understanding how it operates, whether through social media, public demonstrations, or formal policy reports, improves our ability to craft a more sustainable and democratic existence.

The Internet alone is unlikely to bring us radical and plural democracy, however. While potentially more open than other communication media, the Internet also creates new divides along age, income, nationality, and other lines. Moreover, it has been argued that the lack of personal contact and anonymity that characterizes it may result in less trust and responsiveness to social and political causes. Although there are advantages to the Internet as a space of political engagement, multiple such spaces should ideally coexist and interact: various types of online platforms and other new media, traditional media, alternative media (on and offline), the street, community centers, art galleries, workplaces, and other face-to-face and mediated spaces. Rather than *the* public sphere, it may therefore make more sense to speak of a *plurality of public spheres* (cf. Breese, 2011). The level at which this may happen certainly matters. While there are growing communicative practices that some may inscribe in the challenging notion of a "transnational public sphere", "global" climate change can and should also be brought down to other scales of (mediated) politics.

Mouffe argues that "a modern democratic theory must make room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens" (1993/2005: 7). Societies are riddled with tensions and conflicting struggles, and citizens are infinitely diverse in their standings. While not simple, the answers have to involve increased pluralism in addressing climate change at all stages of political life. But rather than expecting consensual deliberation, we should expect

agonistic pluralism. As Mouffe has maintained there is always going to be antagonism in social and political life; antagonism, she claims, is in fact a condition of democracy, not an obstacle to it. For climate change as for any other issue, there is never going to be a unanimous solution or a final suture to the heterogeneous worldviews of political subjects. What are the means for and the implications of applying agonistic pluralism to climate change? Designing spaces and mechanisms of expression of a wide range of views on the problem, including those in disagreement with hegemonic discourses, would be required. In respect for liberty and equality such arrangements would need to take account of the “different social relations and subject positions in which they are relevant” (Mouffe, 1993/2005: 71). These arrangements must enable confrontation of conflicting perspectives about how much we should risk and most likely allow to be destroyed in a world with increasing greenhouse gas emissions, about the worth of economic growth, about consumption and about other social and political issues. Accommodating such a diversity of views on climate change maintains room for denialist positions but also opens space for those that view official policy as insufficient and inadequate, that strive for more substantial and ambitious goals. Obviously, this would pose new challenges. Still, defining (institutional) mechanisms to accommodate agonistic pluralism is a condition to produce better – if only temporary – responses to the enormous challenges posed by climate change.

The paths leading to such transformation are, to a large extent, still to be drawn. Yet, we find hope in the numerous civic initiatives on climate change that have emerged in the last few years, several of which were examined in this book. Citizens, social movements and non-governmental organizations have been experimenting with alternative forms of communication, redefining the meaning of political action and participation. Asen’s (2004) discursive notion of citizenship draws attention “to action that is purposeful, potentially uncontrollable and unruly, multiple, and supportive of radical but achievable democratic practices.” (p. 192). As shown by the analyses in this book, communicative practices, resources, spaces and structures offer key opportunities for inventing alternatives that enable citizens to breathe new life into climate change politics and sanction policies that engage the multiple implications of climate change for contemporary society.

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