

3. Framing information to influence what we hear

... perceptions are shaped not only by scientists but by interest groups, politicians and the media ...

... the climate in the future actually may depend on what we think about it ... what we think, will determine what we do ...

Spencer Weart, 'The discovery of rapid climate change', 2004

If humans have become a geophysical force, then physicist Spencer Weart's history of climate change discovery points out just how important communication is to the way humans influence their biophysical surroundings based on what they believe to be true. What we think filters and translates a scientific message. Or rather, in Western democracies, it is what politicians, the media and the blogosphere think and say that influences what the general public thinks.

The evidence for Australia shows that the dominant narrative about the greenhouse effect/global warming/climate change was altered dramatically from how it started in 1987 through 1991, despite the consistency of the scientific message. How did interest groups, politicians and the media disengage public knowledge from the scientific facts?

The importance of language and framing are at the fore in free market driven democracies like Australia or the United States where regulation is disdained and, therefore, every citizen, or at least a voting majority, must be convinced of the need to act. Should we talk about global warming or climate change (or both tied together)? Does it matter? Apparently so, according to a report on recent nationally representative surveys conducted by the US Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz 2014).

Researchers there have concluded that the terms 'global warming' and 'climate change', at least in the United States, garner significantly different responses from sections of the public, and that those differences relate to what different ethnic groups in society hear and respond to. 'Global warming' reportedly resonates for many with images of melting ice flows and weather catastrophe, while 'climate change' sounds more benign and is more easily accepted as a natural phenomenon.

In the United States, the change to the common use of 'climate change' to characterise the enhanced greenhouse effect was apparently also deliberately

political and made on public relations advice that was received by the George W. Bush administration (Goldberg 2014). Scientists also prefer climate change as a more technically accurate term when a short, lay description is required.

What to do? In this book I have largely used the term climate change as shorthand for the enhanced greenhouse effect or global warming and severe climate change. It is not an either or proposition. Perhaps it is a matter of being aware of what audience is being addressed in the fragmented information environment of today. These findings underline the critical importance of how environmental and many public interest issues are framed and what people are likely to hear and act upon.

The fields of psychology, educational theory, linguistics and neuroscience illuminate the ways in which information is framed and the mental pathways of understanding. They tell us that it is not what you 'say' that matters, but what people 'hear'. This has underpinned education and learning theory for decades and, since the turn of the century, this understanding has been put to good use by propagandists and, more recently, by the public relations industry. This way of looking at how people take up information tells us that people hear or process information and interpret reality based on the sum of their past experience, not least through the filters of professional training as well as their core values, including religion (Lakoff 2004).

In other words, everyone reacts to information based on their memory banks and emotional triggers, which helps explain why communication can be so puzzlingly difficult. Furthermore, there is also a cultural creation of 'reality' beyond physical assumptions about solid matter. Many cultural edicts come from economic theories and religion. Within a given culture there is, then, unspoken agreement to perceive the world in certain ways, or 'myths to live by' in the words of historical philosopher Ronald Wright (2005). So processing science information is not a straightforward path.

Our neurological, social, and cultural constructions of reality dictate what we think about the world around us. This can easily lead to confusion and effective scare campaigns when manipulated, as the climate change story has been: for example on the matter of what action will 'cost' the public.

How we use language and metaphor is a basic part of constructing our reality. Most people probably have not thought of metaphors since high school English, but these mental pathways drive much of our language use. For example, in Western culture there is the influential metaphor of life as a journey: people must have a purpose—'find their way', have 'goals to reach' or they are 'lost', 'without direction'; those who 'reach their goals' fastest are admired, or maybe they have to 'find a different path'.

Cognitive scientist George Lakoff applied this understanding to techniques used in politics and by public relations practitioners to reinforce certain ideas and values. A common technique is to tap into a metaphorical pathway that has positive emotional values, such as freedom, home or family, in order to frame how to think about things (Lakoff 2004).

‘Freedom’ is a classic example of a metaphorical pathway that evokes everything we hold dear about our way of life—as shorthand, the concept merges political, economic and cultural aspirations. Everything attached to the word ‘freedom’ can evoke positive emotions and advertising has long exploited this understanding.

In the late 1960s, University of California communications professor Herbert Schiller wrote about the connection between mass media and American-style commerce and consumption, which is framed as the presence of freedom—in trade, speech and enterprise. In the war of ideas that accompanied the resurgence of neo-liberal economics since the 1970s, this also came to include freedom *from* government regulation of business, a perspective applied by politicians to environmental or public health issues—both relevant to climate change—that might otherwise have invited regulation (in Wheelright 1987).

National interest, jobs, family, battlers, Australian working families, Australian mums and dads: these terms and phrases are intended to evoke a framework of emotional responses. Family and jobs and country are cross-cultural themes and most Australians can understand or respond to these emotional levers. By linking ‘jobs’ and ‘family’, ‘national interest’ and ‘responsible science’, or ‘needing more research’ to messages about delaying action or challenging the science of climate change, members of the public may be induced to change their understanding—forgetting that once they were responding to frames about risk insurance, win-win energy policies, and responsible global citizenship.

It gets more complicated still. Environmental science messages are not only filtered through the use of language and individual understanding; information flow is also affected by institutional interactions (e.g., between researchers and politicians) and also by the influence of ideas and values that are dominant in society. Politics and the media are two primary institutions in the framing of science messages, along with scientists’ own disciplinary cultures, as can be traced in the climate change story in Australia and other Western democracies.

An excellent example is the work of US political consultant and pollster Frank Luntz. During the past two decades he has developed manuals for conservative politicians that tell them what to say to have the desired impact, and he has advised particularly about climate change. In a key memo on climate change,

called ‘winning the global warming debate’ Luntz (2003) advised that a primary strategy was to stoke the fires of scientific uncertainty, and to have scientists do the stoking. Voters had to be persuaded that there was no consensus.

The narrative had to be about us and them, differentiating the mainstream from environmental activists and by implication pitting our family, our nation, against ‘them’. Other themes were: ‘the right decision, not a quick decision’; ‘voluntary innovation and experimentation are preferable to bureaucratic or international intervention and regulation’; ‘fairness’—why should we take action and not those other countries?

Luntz feared that, should people come to believe that climate science is settled, they would want to act accordingly and demand action from their governments. Wanting action was indeed how Australia appeared to react around 1990 when the dominant narrative proposed that the science was clear-cut and the government opted for a vigorous response. Looking over Luntz’s recommendations, one can see a playbook for the reframed story that occurred in Australia during the later 1990s and into the 2000s.

On 13 July 2009 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) *Lateline* program featured the author of a recent book on climate change politics, (Lord) Anthony Giddens from the London School of Economics. He showed how successful this approach of promoting uncertainty was, telling the interviewer that in his surveys of populations in different countries an average 40 per cent of respondents were sceptical that scientists agreed about anthropogenic climate change. The actual case, said Giddens, was that perhaps one per cent of scientists working in the field of climate change remained sceptical of the general message.

The mass media and what they hear

In Australia, as in the United States, the public gets most of its science information through the media (Denemark 2005; Russell 2006), which means that what the media chooses to hear and how it frames what it puts out is key to what the public will perceive as the facts on a science subject. In Australia’s concentrated media market, Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited has a history over the past 20 years of framing climate change science and responses as uncertain and unnecessary, while other print media has changed its narrative over time.

The delivery style also helps to frame the story. Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian critic of mass communications, said after World War II that the mass media shapes our daily narrative of reality by delivering drama, featuring us and them, good and bad, winners and losers (McLuhan 1951). This has not changed.

Research on how public agendas are set in a democracy is also enlightening. Political scientists tell us that Australians prefer an arms-length democracy that allows them to make a choice at election time, and then expect the politicians to set the specific agendas and take care of issues (Johnson 1987; Ward 2001). This has obvious implications for the power of political leadership to focus public understanding and action on an issue like climate change.

As we will see, the evidence over 25 years for Australia is consistent with an understanding of how information is framed and presented to the public as 'reality' with a dramatic change in what we thought we understood about climate change settling in by the mid-1990s, with the earlier understanding being gradually forgotten.

This text taken from *Global Warming and Climate Change:
What Australia knew and buried ... then framed a new reality for the public*,
by Maria Taylor, published 2014 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.