'THAT'S THE POWER OF TALKING ABOUT IT': HOW CLIMATE ACTIVISTS CAN COMMUNICATE BETTER

The director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication offers tips for getting more people on board with climate action.

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The fight against climate change has been suffering some public relations setbacks in the United States. First, there are debates about whether or not it's even happening, despite mountains of evidence and an overwhelming scientific consensus. Further, even though most Americans do believe that climate change is happening, polls show that many voters' reactions are: *Eh. I have more pressing things to worry about*. And our government, which ostensibly exists to protect us, continues to kick the can on bills, like the Green New Deal, that could keep (say) Florida from drowning.

Clearly, something has been miscommunicated here.

For years, climate change was treated as a bipartisan issue. Still, even Senator John McCain—once the leading conservative voice on climate action—did an about-face around the time of his 2008 presidential candidacy: first by nominating Sarah "drill, baby, drill" Palin as his running mate, and then, in the Senate in 2009, when he loudly opposed a cap-and-trade bill even though he himself had written one in 2003.

Anthony Leiserowitz, the director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, says that the YPCCC's research can help explain this hardening of the right-wing view on climate. Leiserowitz

says that the rise of the Tea Party is what led the Republican Party "to crawl all the way out to the last twig on the end of the longest branch, where it became a common talking point to say 'climate change is a hoax.'"

When it comes to studying such trends, the YPCCC is the Pew Research Center of climate change. "Our fundamental goals are to understand how human societies respond to climate change," Leiserowitz says of the center. If you regularly read articles about ecology and climate, you've likely come across some of their polls. The center's twice-yearly "Climate Change in the American Mind" report illustrates Americans' ever-shifting attitudes around climate change; it's a handy reminder that, despite the overrepresentation of climate deniers in Congress, most Americans still accept that climate change is happening.

From his perch overseeing all of this research, Leiserowitz understands the PR crisis that climate change is facing. He recently spoke with Pacific Standard to help us comprehend it—and teach us ways to fix it.

The majority of Americans believe that climate change is happening, yet we still haven't passed a comprehensive plan to do anything about it. Why is that?

We're at an all-time high in accepting climate change is real, at 73 percent of Americans. But that's only 73 percent in terms of even accepting that this is happening, let alone human-caused. Worry is at an all-time high, but only 29 percent of Americans are very worried about climate change. That's higher than ever, but it's nowhere close to high enough. What that means is that most people, even if they accept that [climate change] is real, think of it as distant in time and space, and [believe] that the impacts won't befall us for a generation or more. This is about polar bears, or maybe some developing countries, [they think,] but not the U.S.—not my state, not my community, not my friends, not my family, not me. I think that's a major reason that climate change as a national priority remains relatively low.

I actually am not surprised at all that we haven't taken aggressive national action on this issue, because nobody's really demanding it yet; not in an organized, powerful way that has a prayer of defeating the special interests that absolutely just want to maintain the status quo. I mean in

particular, of course, the fossil fuel industry. It's willing to spend, and have spent, billions of dollars on public relations to try to keep the status quo right where it is. So when you don't have a powerful set of citizen voices demanding action against an opponent that has invested a lot of resources, and very strategically, to influence the political system—I can't say I'm all that surprised that we as a country haven't moved that much.

How do we communicate with these people who believe in climate change but don't think it will affect them?

I think there's enormous potential latent in what's called in political science terms an "issue public": a small set of citizens who care passionately, care deeply about a particular issue, and are willing to demand action from government officials. But they have to be organized, and that's the missing piece. They're not well organized. You know what other issue publics look like: It's the pro- or anti-immigration movement, it's the pro-choice or anti-abortion movement. It's the pro- or anti-guns movement. The [National Rifle Association] is a nice example. The NRA is only about four million members. In a country of over 300 million people, they punch way above their weight in terms of shaping public discourse and public policy because they're organized to have political muscle.

The climate community—in terms of those who say they are definitely willing to join a campaign—outnumber them five to one. The difference is that they're not organized to demand that kind of social change, that kind of political change. We are beginning to see some new groups emerging, and even some of the old ones starting to think about organizing. But I think that's still one of the important missing links in this complex system that we call governance and societal decision-making to address global threats.

How can advocacy groups communicate more effectively? David Wallace-Wells says that fear is an effective motivator for him—are there particular emotions that advocates can evoke to spur action?

There are different types of people, and they're going to respond to this issue in very different ways. Do you think the climate system's complicated? Try people. Try society. It turns out, you can't even understand your own relatives, let alone the behavior of 300 million people. And yet people use these

incredibly simplistic statements, like "fear works, fear doesn't work." It's crazy talk. It's context-dependent.

You need at least two things together in the mind of any person to adequately respond to a threat. One is they need a clear-eyed understanding that they or things that they care about are endangered. If you want to address climate change, you need to talk about climate change, and you need to help people understand this is a serious problem.

You also need to communicate what in psychological terms is called a sense of efficacy. And efficacy basically means that you understand there are things that you or we can do, that you have the ability to do those things, and, perhaps most importantly, that if you do them, it will make a difference. Because otherwise, the human tendency is to avoid problems that are scary and big and uncontrollable.

There have been some debates about the efficacy of micro-shifts in language, like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' recent call for more animal-friendly phrases. Are these little shifts going to change anything?

We actually did a study a couple of years ago on the difference between the use of the words "global warming" versus "climate change." What we found very clearly is this distinction: Americans were more convinced that global warming was real than [that] climate change [was real]; they were more convinced [global warming] was human-caused than climate change; they were more worried about global warming than about climate change. They were more supportive of policies to deal with global warming than climate change, and these differences, especially when you started to break it down by specific groups—say, Latinos—were huge.

My suggestion is, look, if you've got 30 seconds on a radio program, or on a news show, and you've only got 30 seconds to communicate your idea about this issue, then I would call it "global warming," because more of your audience is going to know immediately what you're talking about if you use that term. If, on the other hand, you're having an interview, like we are, over the course of an hour, you'll notice I've been using global warming *and* climate change. And that's fine. And then if

you really want to use those terms like global weirding and climate chaos, think of them as seasoning, like salt and pepper.

Are there things that the media can do better in communication on climate change?

Definitely. One of the most important is just to talk about it. Just report on this issue. There's an old academic communication studies statement about media: The media doesn't tell you what to think; it does tell you what to think about. It directs your attention. When the media doesn't report this issue, it's literally out of sight and out of mind for most Americans. The most fundamental thing, leaving aside the whole, long conversation about the quality of coverage, is the quantity.

Two other issues have emerged in the past few years as topics of discussion: The #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter. Do you or does anybody believe that sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual discrimination only became a problem a few years ago? Were African Americans being unduly affected by the criminal justice system, and sometimes in the harshest ways—is that a new phenomenon that only happened a few years ago? Of course not. This has been going on for hundreds of years. But until we talked about it, many people weren't aware of how serious these problems were, or, in some cases, that they even existed. That's the power of talking about it. The more that media reports these issues, the more we talk about it. The more we talk about it, the more the media reports it, because that's what people want to learn about.