

Calling for a Revolution in Climate Change Rhetoric

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/10/06/calling-for-a-revolution-in-climate-change-rhetoric/

2015-10-6

*When journalists talk about climate change are they failing to address the underlying issues and so missing a chance to connect this complex narrative to real people's lives? **Hanna Morris** reports on her own research looking at the language of the climate change debate.*



“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

Countless generations of bullied children have been advised to recite this well-meaning phrase of consolation by teachers and parents. David Hume, Michel Foucault, and a whole slew of philosophers, however, would beg to differ. Words, in fact, are extremely powerful. Strings of vowels, consonants, verbs, and nouns are woven together to create languages that build common narratives of an individual's and a society's understanding of lived reality. And these narratives have real, physical impacts—with climatic proportions.

Take, for instance, the worn-and-withered climate change talking points recited by President Obama in Alaska a few weeks back: apocalyptic imagery of rising seas in an abstract, dystopian future hypothesized by men in lab-coats. This limited and cryptic narrative is standard oration when describing global warming on a public stage. References to melting glaciers, hurricanes, and technological fixes by “experts” are the norm. The problem is, this doomsday, distant, and technocratic rhetoric fails to incite public interest beyond the “already converted” and does little to motivate dynamic policy.



The evolution of the American climate change conversation is interesting. The “debate” over factual existence of global warming is no longer a concern within the scientific community (despite what may be broadcasted from the Fox newsroom). The research is clear: climate change *is* occurring, and at a rapid rate. The resolution of this “debate” has allowed scientists to conduct deeper inquiries into the effects of temperature spikes on not just physical

systems, but on chemical and biological ones too. And perhaps the most novel development of climate change research is within the realm of social sciences.

More and more researchers are trying to understand and illuminate the effects of climate change on social, economic, and political systems. In other words, scholars consider global warming to be a pressing *human* concern, not just a scientific one.

Social scientists are, for example, proving that there are inequitable burdens among low-income communities of color from climate change. Resource scarcity, drought, and extreme weather events such as Superstorm Sandy affect the economically and politically marginalized more than the rich and powerful (the decision-makers that also happen to be driving global warming). This research is often referred to as inquiries of “climate justice.”

And yet, despite these notable social science developments that transform climate change from obscure scientific phenomenon into an immediate and recognizable *community* concern, public interest and policy action both continue to plateau. Why?

I sought to answer this question through research at the University of California, Berkeley’s College of Natural Resources. I wanted to learn what, exactly, characterized the current climate change conversation. Or put more simply, how are Americans perceiving and talking about global warming?

Through my research, I identified patterns of argument and recurring narrative threads constructed by *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* editorialists in relation to the topic of “climate change” / “global warming.” Out of all *NY Times* and *WSJ* op-eds that appeared online or in print during the year 2013, the topic of climate change represented just 1.47% and 0.73% of the “opinion” content respectively. Additionally, I found that op-eds within the *NY Times* and *WSJ* failed to engage in an analysis beyond a few “hot topics” including the carbon tax, alternative energy, extreme weather events, and proposed climate regulation—overlooking the important social context of climate change.

“Climate justice” or, the link between climate change and the disproportionate burden among the politically and economically marginalized, was strikingly absent from the opinion section—despite its importance in emerging scholarship AND the current, drought-riddled landscape of unrest in the Middle East. Also missing were discussions of institutional and societal *drivers* of climate change (i.e. “Western” economic growth patterns, trade sanctions, policies of economic “development,” etc.). The interplay between climate change and the larger societal causes of injustice and political discord did *not* appear in either the *NY Times* or *WSJ*.

This limited lens hampers a more dynamic public understanding of climate change. Images of extreme hurricanes, melting glaciers, and electric cars do not capture the full picture. In fact, these narratives falsify climate change as simply a far-off, scientific and technical issue as opposed to a local, *human* and community problem. The dominant discourse of climate change is alienating and abstract rather than engaging and humanizing. A revolution in public climate change rhetoric is *clearly* needed in the United States.

Words and language provide the impetus and power behind actions for change. Perhaps op-eds and traditional news media are not the only or best means for opening up a broader dialogue. Social media, documentary films, apps, blogs, vlogs, and a whole slew of emerging, interactive forms of expression may allow for a more creative bridge in narration beyond the orthodoxy. Nonetheless, it’s apparent that those concerned with the multifaceted impacts of rising global temperatures need to dedicate more focus and attention on the language used to shape the climate change conversation. Words *clearly* do cause more harm (or good) than sticks and stones, despite what your grandmother or grade school teachers may have told you.

Hanna Morris is and MSc student in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE. She recently completed her Bachelor’s of Science degree at the University of California, Berkeley where she received the “Melis Medal for Most Outstanding Honors Research Project and Presentation” awarded for her thesis, “*Decoding*

Journalistic Climate Change Narratives: A discourse analysis of climate change op-eds published in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal during the year 2013.” She will be presenting her research this October at the annual Eco-linguistics Symposium at the University of Graz in Austria.

@sustaintheconvo

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science