

# Talking about the climate crisis

## WHY COMMUNICATION IS CRUCIAL TO CLIMATE PROTECTION

Christopher Schrader

**The article shows how to communicate the climate crisis in a positive way, thereby increasing people's willingness to open up to ideas and impulses for climate-friendly behavioural change.**

### WE ARE ALL CLIMATE COMMUNICATORS. SO ARE YOU!

Why should we care about climate communication? One simple answer is: because we all talk far too little to each other about the climate crisis and possible solutions – and when we do, it is often wrong and ineffective. So what should we pay attention to when communicating? What do we want to achieve?

Talking about climate change with family, friends or colleagues often puts us in a bad mood. You already suspect that there's going to be an argument or that someone might come up with some counterargument that you can't quickly refute. Or that you will be accused of inconsistency in your everyday behaviour. Maybe you don't feel confident about the details of highly complex climate research. Or you don't really know how to solve the climate crisis yourself. And we don't really want to tell others what they should and shouldn't do, what they might have to do without in the interests of climate protection. Live and let live. It's often better to keep your mouth shut.

### SPIRAL OF SILENCE: OF LOUD AND QUIET AND FEW AND MANY

In 1980, the German pollster Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann from the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research explained what happens next: a spiral of silence is set in motion. When it comes to controversial topics, people often make it clear what they think of an opinion that has been expressed. And because most people want to avoid contradiction and social isolation,

they tend to keep their views to themselves if they consider them to be controversial or a minority position – and therefore expect contradiction (Noelle-Neumann, 1980), which means that this viewpoint seems even more to belong to a minority, even if it is held by a majority. The spiral is thus self-perpetuating.

Some experts therefore describe talking more about the climate with other people as “the easiest way” to combat climate change (e.g. Goldberg et al., 2019). However, if the spiral of silence continues unchecked, little of

the issue will reach the places where decisions are made. This does not (only) mean the political committees – but above all living rooms, tea kitchens, classrooms, changing rooms, sunbathing areas, workshops, canteen tables, pub counters, meetings of tenants or homeowners. Or virtual platforms, online neighbourhood forums, briefings and video chats with colleagues. Above all, it means the minds and hearts of the people there. As the activists from the British organisation Climate Outreach, for example, put it, the scientific reality of climate change must become a social reality. But how can this be done? Below is a summary of the key points (see also Schrader & klimafakten.de, 2022<sup>1</sup>).



Ill. 1: Strong images showing individuals who work on climate solutions are very likely to evoke emotions

## Climate communication is multi-layered

We need to talk about talking, but also about listening. The first important thing to remember is that communication is not linear and one-dimensional, not a simple transmission from sender to receiver – it is multi-layered and multi-directional. It has multiple levels: Words, tones of voice, gestures, facial expressions, unspoken words, images, emotions, associations, speaker personalities. It is, in the words of brain researcher Gerhard Roth, the “reciprocal construction of meaning” (2003). Meaning here refers to the significance of the message for one’s own life, which can empower the sender of a message and motivate the recipient of this message to change behaviour.

## Climate change is a wicked problem

Climate change and its causes are a “wicked problem”, as British researcher Mike Hulme (2009) and others have recognised. The intertwined, diverse elements of the crisis are interdependent and interrelated; they can no longer be isolated from each other and solved individually, as we usually do with difficult problems. Even if the big oil companies collapsed overnight, it would not end the waste and over-exploitation of the earth that is woven into all our lifestyles.

## Mental shortcuts and cognitive biases

We are not nearly as rational as we think we are. Our brains and perceptions are poorly equipped to draw the right conclusions from facts and information on sensitive, emotionally significant issues and in the face of long-term dangers. A number of mental shortcuts and cognitive biases come into play that characterise the human perceptual apparatus – for virtually every issue and virtually every person.

There are many ways of changing (or not changing) behaviour, with social values and norms playing a central role.

## Facts vs. values

Psychologists have long known that the best way to reach people is through their values and ideals. This applies to both good and bad. If there is a conflict between the facts and a person’s values, the facts will lose, says the Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes (2015), who has written a book and lectures on the cognitive and emotional aspects of climate change.

Because facts lose out in cases of doubt, it is important to reconcile facts with values and to expose conflicts between the two that only seem to be real. One of the most effective ways of doing this is through people who can present facts, embody the values of the target group and combine the two. This is exactly what the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recognised when it awarded evangelical climate researcher Katherine Hayhoe from Texas Tech University the title of “Champion of the Earth” in 2019. Hayhoe’s message, especially to conservative, often deeply religious US-Americans, is that those who want to prevent the climate crisis do not have to be left-wing or put down the Bible; the Christian faith can be just as motivating. Beyond this specific example, wisely chosen issue ambassadors, trusted voices and personal social values play an important role. All of this requires precise knowledge of the specific target group of the communication, which is an indispensable element of the preparation.

## The beginning: questions rather than statements

If possible, the conversation should be started with questions rather than statements. Listen to what is important to people, what moves them, what they expect and what they want to achieve. One goal of climate crisis

communication is then to overcome the “psychological distance”, so that people do not see climate change only as a problem that will affect the future or happen in other parts of the world.

## Turning people from objects into subjects

If this is successful, a key aspect will be to address the fear of change or deterioration in one’s own living conditions. For most people, the changes (which are necessary to deal with climate change appropriately) are easier to bear if they feel like taking them rather than being subjected to them. It must be made clear to them that they themselves can (co-)determine the future by taking active measures. This increases their willingness to open up to ideas and impulses to change their behaviour. A basic rule of good climate communication is to sound as positive as possible rather than admonishing. After all, communicating climate protection with accusations and recriminations is unlikely to achieve anything.

## Telling stories through case studies and images

Ideally, climate communicators convey their messages to people whose undivided attention they have. Stories can help here, for example of people with whom the audience can identify, who have changed their lives and behaviour and report on the benefits they have gained. Images are another important means of communication. If they are good, they evoke emotions and thus help to convey content convincingly – which is precisely why images need to be chosen carefully. The polar bear, for example, which is often used to illustrate the climate crisis, actually says: The climate crisis is about animals that live far away, but not about people, not about me or my friends. Games, art or literature can also contribute to experiencing the climate crisis and its solutions on an interactive, individual level.

### Framing – naming the crisis

What frames of meaning are conveyed in messages? What can the audience hear without being told? Classic examples are the descriptions of the fundamental phenomenon that concerns us here: “Climate change” initially sounds neutral, “global warming” even rather positive. It is therefore better to use the terms “global heating” and “climate crisis” because they are associated with changes that are dangerous for us, and with the possibility of making decisions and averting the worst. Beyond individual terms, frames of meaning can also determine expectations about who has something to say about an issue or how developments are likely to continue. One important frame, for example, is to no longer present climate policy as a tedious process of working through problems, but as a joint search for and implementation of attractive solutions.

### Pay attention to emotions

All these methods of communicating to people evoke emotions. According to psychologists, these are “indicators of need and motivators for action” and therefore also play a crucial role in the processing and implementation of information (e.g. van Bronswijk, 2020; Harré, 2018). Emotions are often underestimated in communication. This can be fatal, because anyone who reduces the climate crisis to a huge, virtually inevitable catastrophe and spreads panic can expect rejection. Solutions should therefore always be offered in a way that gives people a sense of control over their situation.

### Avoid apportioning blame

If you want to communicate climate protection with accu-

sations and blame, you won't get very far. That is why the messages should also be positive. Certainly, the climate crisis has serious and dangerous consequences (not only for polar bears, but also for us), which should be clearly and specifically stated. But there are already many solutions and examples (Ill. 1). It is important to strengthen the feeling of self-efficacy: People get this when they realise that they themselves can make a difference and that it does make a difference.

### Be prepared for grief and its consequences

After all, we must not forget that for many people, the solutions to the climate crisis are tantamount to the end of an era. They have grown up in a time of ever-increasing prosperity and their ideas of a good life often revolve around consumption, travelling and growth – and now they are supposed to give that up without a replacement, they think. Accepting, processing, and overcoming the resulting feelings of grief require help and time and can be accompanied by phenomena such as burnout, climate anxiety or solastalgia<sup>2</sup>.

#### REAL TALK about climate change

- R**espect your conversational partner and find common ground
- E**njoy the conversation
- A**sk questions
- L**isten, and show you've heard
- T**ell your story
- A**ction makes it easier (but doesn't fix it)
- L**earn from your conversational partner
- K**eep going and keep connected

Ill. 2: 8 key points for talking about the climate crisis (Webster & Marshall, 2019)

### Disinformation – supply and demand

The climate debate has been rife with misinformation and attempts to delay responses and mislead the public by sowing doubt almost from the start. They have been disseminated by and with the financial support of companies and political actors who profit from the fossil fuel lifestyle and want to hold on to it. Virtually all false reports have long since been refuted but are nevertheless still effective. This is because there is a demand for this information. Those who refer to doubts about scientific claims can remain inactive without looking bad to themselves or others. While it is important to repeatedly correct disinformation, the key question is: do we want to be right or do we want to make a difference? A purely scientific response to doubters and deniers is often not a good strategy. It is certainly not possible to do without research evidence, but this alone is hardly enough to convince opponents of climate protection, or even make them reconsider. People who doubt the scientific evidence on climate change are usually not interested in science at all. It is often better to take a step back, look for the real reasons and focus on them.

### There is no super strategy

Basically, it is important not to hope for a single super strategy, but to pursue many different approaches. As Bill McKibben from the international climate movement 350.org puts it: “There are no silver bullets, only silver buckshot.”<sup>3</sup>

### The climate communication stance

George Marshall, co-founder of the British organisa-

tion Climate Outreach, has produced several excellent materials in this context, such as the *Talking Climate Handbook* (Webster & Marshall, 2019), which contains, among other things, 8 key points for talking and listening. They can be summarised in English by their initial letters to form the keyword “Real Talk” – from “Respect your conversational partner and find common ground” to “Keep going and keep connected” (Ill. 2). In all of this, we should not forget to reflect on our own communication work, evaluate our successes and de-

velop a certain humility: If talking is primarily aimed at getting people to change their behaviour, how far does the influence of individual decisions extend? A central element of a climate protection strategy must also be to exert pressure on politicians and to campaign for a change in standards, norms, values, laws, etc. – publicly, loudly, and persistently. So the question is: have we encouraged and empowered the people around us to do this? It may be that talking is not enough. But that’s where it starts. ■

## 10 KEY PRINCIPLES: HOW TO COMMUNICATE CLIMATE CHANGE FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

People do not form their attitudes or take action as a result primarily of weighing up expert information and making rational cost-benefit calculations. Instead, climate change communication needs to connect with people at the level of values and emotions. Two aspects appear to be of special importance:

1. Climate communication needs to focus more on effectively speaking to people who have not been adequately addressed by climate communication so far, but who are crucial for building broad public engagement.
2. Climate communication needs to support a shift from concern to agency, where high levels of climate risk perception are translated into pro-climate individual and collective action.

The 10 key principles are as follows (Sippel et al., 2022):

### How to open the door?

1. Connect with people’s values
2. Support trusted messengers
3. Test, research, and don’t trust your own instincts

### How to reach people’s hearts and minds?

4. Bring climate home – highlighting visions and solutions
5. Use frames and narratives in a considered way
6. Tell powerful stories and use effective imagery
7. Provide accurate information and be careful communicating uncertainties

### How to turn concern into action?

8. Provide spaces for interaction
9. Make climate action an issue of social belonging
10. Offer possibilities for meaningful personal action

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed version, see Schrader, Christopher, *klimafakten.de* (Ed.) (2022). *Über Klima sprechen. Das Handbuch*. Munich: Oekom. Available at: <https://www.oekom.de/buch/ueber-klima-sprechen-9783962383749> [8.4.24]

<sup>2</sup> Solastalgia refers to the pain caused by the loss or destruction of a sense of security at home or one’s own living space.

<sup>3</sup> <https://thebulletin.org/2019/04/silver-buckshot-isnt-enough-to-fix-the-climate/> [3.5.24]

## REFERENCES

Goldberg, Matthew, van der Linden, Sander, Maibach, Edward et al. (2019). *Discussing global warming leads to greater acceptance of climate science*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(30), 14804-14805.

Harré, Niki (2018). *Psychology for a better world: Working with people to save the planet*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

Hulme, Mike (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change. Understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth (1980). *Die Schweigespirale. Öffentliche Meinung – unsere soziale Haut*. Zürich/Munich: Piper.

Roth, Gerhard (2003). *Fühlen, Denken, Handeln. Wie das Gehirn unser Verhalten steuert*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Sippel, Maike, Shaw, Chris & Marshall, George (2022). *Ten key principles: How to communicate climate change for effective public engagement*. *Climate Outreach Working Paper*. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

Stoknes, Per Espen (2015). *What we think about when we try not to think about global warming*. London: Chelsea Green.

van Bronswijk, Katharina (2020). *Kommunikation über die Klimakrise: „Früher war alles immer Wetter“*. *Taz* from 26.9.2020. Available at: <https://taz.de/Kommunikation-ueber-die-Klimakrise/!5716352/> [15.4.24]

Webster, Robin & Marshall, George (2019). *The #TalkingClimate Handbook. How to have conversations about climate change in your daily life*. Oxford: Climate Outreach. Available at: <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/how-to-have-a-climate-change-conversation-talking-climate/> [15.4.24]

## THE AUTHOR

Christopher Schrader works as a science journalist and gives lectures, seminars, and workshops on climate communication.



Photo: © Philipp Arnoldt/Humboldt Foundation