

## 220. What drives Climate Change ‘Drifters’

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**Abstract.** There has been a significant drift globally in public belief in anthropogenic climate change—with varying degrees of drift in different countries. Much effort has gone into trying to diminish this drift by better clarifying and arguing the science behind climate change. But evidence indicates that the drifters are not primarily motivated nor dissuaded by the science, and science-based discussions need to be radically reframed to have any impact upon them.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Sceptics, Public attitudes

### Introduction

Several years from now, when science communicators have finished analyzing and dissecting the communications efforts of global climate change, it will most likely be seen as an excellent case study for the development of science communications thinking—towards being more audience-centric, and understanding the need for multiple and complex solutions to multiple and complex problems.

At least if we learn lessons from climate change communications it will be.

Much climate change communication could be described as ‘almost good’—but that is like a bridge being

‘almost long enough’ to span a chasm. An irony is that, taken collectively, the many different communication strategies and theories being applied would probably span the chasm quite easily, and would constitute a multiple and complex approach. But many efforts to date have been characterized by being more competitive than co-operative.

This is in part due to the reverse panopticon prison effect.

To explain: the panopticon was a model prison, designed by the English philosopher and social theorist, Jeremy Bentham, in 1785. The basic concept was of a huge circular building of many jail cells, all with an open barred side on the inside, all pointing towards a central observation post. A prisoner could never tell when the jailer, sitting out of sight inside the observation post, might be watching them. The concept of the prison as a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, was later popularised by the French philosopher Michel Foucault.[1]

In the reverse panopticon, the perspective is turned around, so instead of having one central observer, we consider the perspective of the dozens, if not hundreds, of different perspectives from the cells, all looking towards a central point. And trapped inside the cells the prisoners have no idea of what the other perspectives might be, and can only see the world from their singular perspective. The irony, again, is that taken together they would have a more complete world view than would be possible for any one person.

This is the problem that has assailed much climate change communications, and indeed many attempts to address multiple and complex problems. It is repeated over and over whenever interest groups are captive to the limited perspective of their cells, and argue stridently that their singular perspective of the solution to any problem is the one that needs to be most heeded, and how the others’ are clearly faulted.

The effect is also evidenced in the adage, ‘We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are..[2] So

let’s begin by considering that the problem of climate change is multiple and complex, and therefore in need of multiple and complex solutions to effectively address it, and that this requires an attempt to pool as many different strategies and perspectives together as possible.

From that perspective, this paper looks at climate change drifters, those who once believed in or supported the idea of global climate change, but no longer do. The research is based on seeking to understand their perspectives, rather than seeking to convert them, for we should begin any attempt to better understand the drifters by talking to them rather than scolding them. By looking at a wide spread of research into the psychological causes of climate change drift, including public attitude research and focus group findings from discussions with climate change drifters, some lessons can be learned as to the benefit of incorporating different perspectives into strategic communications towards this section of the population.

To begin with, five key lessons I have learned from ten years of dealing with public reactions to contentious technologies including stem cells, GM foods and nanotechnology, that are applicable to understanding the drifters:

1. When information is complex, people make decisions based on their values and beliefs.
2. People seek affirmation of their attitudes (or beliefs) – no matter how fringe – and will reject any information that is counter to their attitudes (or beliefs).
3. Attitudes that were not formed by logic are not influenced by logical arguments
4. Public concerns about biotechnologies and nanotechnologies (and climate change as well) are almost never about the science – and scientific information therefore does little to influence those concerns.
5. People most trust those whose values mirror their own. The first thing that it is vital to understand is that for many of the climate change drifters the issue is not the veracity of the science, and arguments about the science do little to change their minds.

### Deficit 2.0 Model

That the public or sections of the public should have a science-centric view of the world is what I term the Deficit 2.0 Model, based on the dogma that: If only you thought more scientifically (like me) you would get it!

Instead, I would argue that, if scientists and science communicators only thought more like climate change drifters, they would get it. ‘It’ being a better understanding of their perspectives, values and likely influences. And from having talked to many drifters, instead of asking: ‘Why have so many members of the public changed their belief in climate change?’, the more relevant questions seems to be: ‘Given the circumstances, how could they not?’

### So what exactly are the drifters telling us?

From the evidence of letters to the editor and talk back radio and so on, the key issue amongst climate change drifters appears to be a loss of confidence in the reality of, and the science behind, climate change. This is being articulated in these mediums as being due to several factors, including:

- Globally and locally governments can’t agree on what to do,
- Scientists appear to disagree on findings and distort the truth,
- Emission Trading Schemes and Carbon Taxes are either very complex or in disarray,
- There are too many messages of over-whelming doom and gloom, and
- There is a feeling that nothing they do (or have done) really made any difference.

To test these statements the Department of Innovation conducted a focus group and an online poll with climate change drifters. The focus group was held in Melbourne on 17 May 2010. Participants were recruited based on their agreeing with the statement that they now believed less that climate change is happening than they had in the past. The group comprised:

- A 35-year-old single male, recruitment consultant for construction and engineering.
- A 44-year-old male, machine operator, married with a daughter.
- A 38-year-old married female, executive assistant.
- A 41-year-old married female accounts worker, with four teenage boys.
- A 45-year-old male, married with one daughter, working in aged care management
- A 29-year-old married female, employed with two daughters.
- A 46-year-old married investigator with two children.

The purpose of the focus group was to better understand the reasons for their decreased belief that climate change was happening, and the moderator began by presenting them with two statements and asking them which one they most aligned with.

STATEMENT 1: I feel a sense of disarray about climate change due to the complexity, lack of trust, doom and gloom and no indication of what to do about it.

STATEMENT 2: Climate change is not as bad as I’ve been told and I don’t need to do anything or incur any costs.

All participants stated that they most agreed with Statement 1, and while not all participants agreed with all parts of the statement, they all wholeheartedly agreed that they felt a sense of disarray about climate change. In addressing reasons for moving from believing in climate change, key motivations given were:

***Confusion***

- There was a sense of cynicism within the groups that the climate change debate was largely controlled by the media and was now more about money than saving the world.
- Over the past few years the participants had heard various messages that climate change was getting worse, or that it was under control and also that it was not as bad a problem as it had originally been made out to be.
- Two to three years ago there was a much clearer message that climate change was a real problem; but this was not the case any more.

***Lack of trust in government and science***

- Coupled with not knowing what to believe, there was an overarching lack of trust in anyone who had an opinion on climate change.
- Government, both locally and globally, had a large part to play in participants' change of feelings towards climate change.
- Scientists, too, were accused of adding to the general confusion surrounding climate change; they presented conflicting messages about the reality and impact of climate change.

***Clear and consistent messaging***

- Their current state of confusion meant the participants were unlikely to trust anyone or know what to believe any more. Regardless of who were to deliver a message, be that a politician, a scientist or even a celebrity, the participants felt any message delivered would have a hidden agenda.
- Until a clear and consistent message about climate change was promoted and acted upon by those delivering the message (essentially led by government), there was little hope of the participants doing anything further than what they were currently doing.

***Online poll data***

These findings were then fed into the design of an online poll, held in June 2010, seeking to obtain data from a wider range of climate change drifters. One thousand people were surveyed, based on their being filtered for inclusion by agreeing to one of the following statements:

- I am confused as to what to believe about global climate change because of the conflicting messages,
- Global Climate change is happening, but is not as severe as we have been told.
- Global climate change is happening, but is not caused by humans,
- Global climate change is not happening.

***The sample group surveyed could then be broken down into:***

- The confused (52 per cent)
- The moderate sceptics (45 per cent)
- The most sceptical (2 per cent).

Among this group 55 per cent said their levels of concern about climate change had increased over the past years, 43 per cent said they had stayed the same and 3 per cent said it had decreased.

When just the moderate sceptics were filtered for this question (484 people), 45 per cent said their levels of concern had increased, 50 per cent said they had stayed the same and 4 per cent said they had decreased. Amongst the most sceptical (25 people) all stated that their concern had increased.

Trust in the claims of scientists amongst the overall sample and amongst the moderate sceptics was fairly consistent, with 20 per cent and 19 per cent having increased trust, 60 per cent and 58 per cent same trust and 20 per cent and 23 per cent diminished trust. But amongst the most sceptical there was no increase in trust: 24 per cent stayed the same and 76 per cent had decreased trust.

The divide in attitudes towards questions of belief in climate change amongst the general survey population, the moderate sceptics and the most sceptical is shown in figure 1.

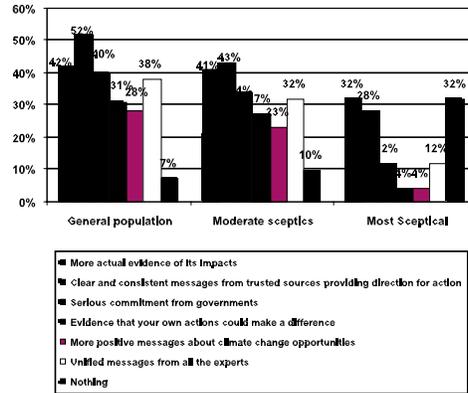


Figure 1: Which statement best describes your feelings about climate change?

Then, addressing the question: ‘What types of information or activities might make you more convinced that climate change was a serious issue with significant impacts?’ – the moderate sceptics were again not too far different from the general survey group, but there were significant differences with the most sceptical, as shown in figure 2.

It is fair to assume that the most sceptical are unwilling to change their positions, but the confused and moderate sceptics clearly stated what types of arguments or evidence was most needed to convince them of the reality of climate change. These are shown to be multiple and complex, and unlikely to be impacted by a single message.

An issues not addressed in this small study was the impact on attitudes of anti-climate change stories. But while there has been considerable debate on information versus misinformation in the climate change debate, it is perhaps more important to focus, not on the fact that there are many anti-science misinformation campaigns being conducted, but on the reasons they are resonating with a substantial proportion of the public.

### The Psychology of climate change denial

This leads us to try and better understand the psychology of opinion on climate change. Attempting to correlate the findings of several studies, and achieve a wider perspective, there are some key findings that stand out.

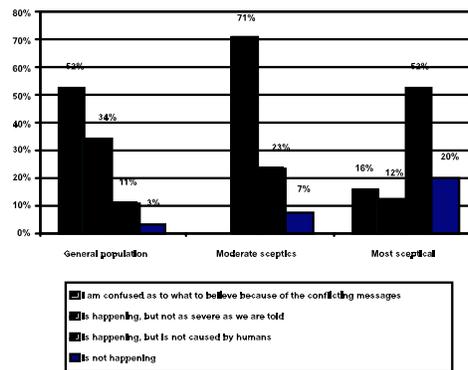


Figure 2: What types of information or activities might make you more convinced that climate change was a serious issue with significant impacts?

There has been a matched growth in both scientific evidence and scepticism and denial. According to Kari Marie Norgaard, a Whitman College sociologist, this seeming inconsistency can be explained as:

“Our response to disturbing information is very complex. We negotiate it. We don’t just take it in and respond in a rational way. Climate change is disturbing. It’s something we don’t want to think about. So what we do in our everyday lives is create a world where it’s not there, and keep it distant.”[3]

Which indicates that more scientific evidence is probably not the answer.

Sustained doom and gloom messages conflict with many people’s belief systems

Linda Connor, an anthropologist at the University of Sydney, has commented on this, stating that:

“As Ernest Becker argued over 30 years ago, the denial of death and the perpetuation of self and social group is the defining element of cultural world views...”[4]

She has said that negative messages about the future, such as those expressed in discourses of climate crisis, are a challenge to our cultural projection of immortality, and such negative messages, connected with death and decline, cause conscious and unconscious defence mechanisms that prompt us towards the life affirming messages of consumer capitalism.

Similarly, a study by Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan, Jaeger, found that in order to overcome cognitive dissonance, people’s minds create a number of socio-psychological denial mechanisms. These heighten the costs of shifting away from comfortable lifestyles, set blame on the inaction of others, including governments, and emphasise doubts regarding the immediacy of personal action “when the effects of climate change seemed uncertain and far away”. [5] This is quite similar to the reactions of the focus group held in Melbourne which suggest that negative messages

may turn more people into drifters, and more positive perspectives may be needed.

### Psychological barriers to accepting climate change

According to the American Psychological Association, key psychological barriers to accepting climate change include:

- Uncertainty – over climate change reduces the frequency of ‘green’ behaviour.
  - Mistrust – most people don’t believe the risk messages of scientists or government officials.
  - Social comparison - People routinely compare their actions with those of others and derive subjective and descriptive norms from their observations about what is the “proper” course of action. e.g. Al Gore’s large residence has been used as a justification for inaction.
  - Undervaluing risks – A study of more than 3,000 people in 18 countries showed that many people believe environmental conditions will worsen in 25 years from now. Which can lead people to believe that changes can be made later.
  - Lack of Control – People believe their actions would be too small to make a difference/
  - Perceived behavioural control - Climate change is a global problem, so many individuals feel that they can do nothing about it. This is the well-known collective action problem.
  - Habit – Ingrained behaviours are extremely resistant to permanent change, while others change slowly.
- [6]

### Attitudes tend to align with political viewpoints

Several studies have noted that climate change drifters and denialists tend to be politically conservative, while climate change supporters tend to be left leaning, as shown in Figure 3, a poll of Australian voters and their alignment with different parties positions on climate change, produced for the Australian Climate Science Coalition. [7]

While it is over simplistic to conclude that a person’s political leanings govern their attitude towards climate change, it may be more the case

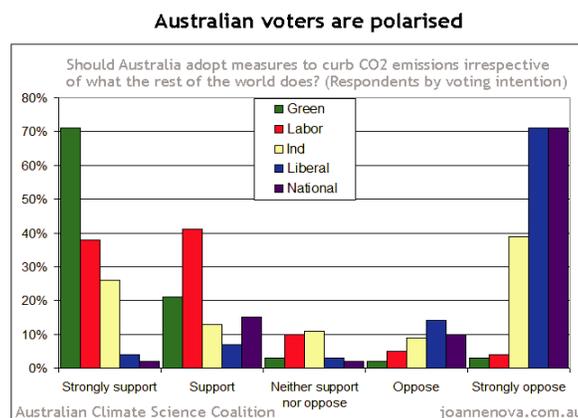


Figure 3: ACSC Poll of Australians attitudes to climate change and political affiliation

that a person’s underlying personal philosophy as to whether humans should dominate the planet (anthropocentrism), or live with the planet (geocentrism), is one of the drivers of political ideology and climate

change ideology both.

Which brings us back to a need to better understand different people's values, from their perspectives. Public attitudes tend to eventually achieve a natural balance point, that can be distorted in the short-term by information, misinformation and disinformation campaigns. But until that happens climate change drifters will continue to find the messages that best accord with their values.

For those working in science communications, who see the major challenge as being to maximise understanding of global climate change and encourage mitigating behaviours, this appears more likely to be achieved by changing their messages to better align with drifters' values rather than trying to shift the drifters' attitudes through any well-reasoned scientific data or evidence.

## Conclusions

### *So what does it all mean? Well, two key messages:*

Firstly, the issue of climate change is a multiple and complex one, or a wicked problem to use a more contemporary expression, and will only be effectively addressed by multiple and complex solutions that bring the multitude of different expert perspectives together, and more effectively work with each other than against each other. It is a matter of increasing the length of the bridge, or bringing all the cells in the panopticon prison together, or putting all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together – you choose your favourite metaphor. There is some evidence that we are getting better at this, demonstrated by efforts such as the Australian Science Communicators Hot Air Symposia, which have pooled an enormous amount of data to develop into a guide for communicating the science of climate change.

[8]

Secondly, to effectively communicate with any of the many segments of the public, such as climate change drifters, communications must be framed from their perspective and understanding – not the perspective and understanding of scientists nor science communicators.

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