

Our Role is Information: Youth and Messaging in the Climate Crisis

As the world confronts the past three hundred years where the Industrial Revolution and its descendants have simultaneously moved to advance humanity while surrounding us in its smoke and dust, nations are scrambling to set and achieve ambitious goals for sustainability and equity across the world. At first glance, there appears to be reason for optimism: 74 countries which account, cumulatively, for almost 70% of all CO₂ emissions and over 3,000 companies have created plans to make “net-zero” emissions become the foundation of the future. Yet there is also a great deal of skepticism, much of it fair. Some may point to the fossil fuel industry’s strong support of carbon capture technology, still in its fledgling years, as opposed to phasing out hydrocarbon usage as a sign that large, emission-emitting industries are merely paying lip service to the idea of sustainability and environmental responsibility that “net-zero” is supposed to mean; others may look at the difficulty of developing nations in balancing the needs of their people and their economies with the environment and pollution goals, decrying the hypocrisy where older, wealthier nations attempt to “kick away the ladder”, to borrow the term from Chang (2002), and place the onus of stringent change on the poorest and most vulnerable. Both sides have valid, plausible reasons for their beliefs, and I believe that it is the role of the youth, the future generations and leaders of the world, to find the middle ground between visionary and pragmatist in the fight for net-zero.

While there must always be an active arm which cries out loudly and brashly to grab the attention of the world, there must also be those who search for compromises between actors with vastly different incentives and motives; there must always be those who run the laboratory tests, crunch the numbers and churn out valuable and important research every day, and there must also be those who take up the mantle of properly educating and redirecting an-already hijacked narrative. This last task, I believe, falls not to the leaders of today, but to those of

tomorrow; those of my generation. While we can have experts and politicians and world leaders constantly talking about different policies or whether and how economics should play a role, how and what kind of legislation should be passed or other such tasks, it is critical to remember that the remaining 99.9% of people on this planet need to be constantly reminded and nudged to care about climate change even if they cannot see or feel its effects; I argue that while there are many roles for certain members of my generation, particularly those with strong technical skills or research ability or rhetorical zeal, there is also a significant role to be played by the rest of us in providing and disseminating correct and “good” information to others.

Before we can talk about net-zero emissions or carbon capture technology or “cleaner” energy, we need to first address the pandemic of skepticism and misinformation surrounding climate change in the general public. The most arduous task before us is in first ensuring that all of us that call the Earth home are on the same page with climate change, its devastating effects, and what exactly needs to be done to fix it. The apparent simplicity of these most basic requirements belies the consistent struggle of climate scientists, activists and concerned politicians to convince people of the legitimacy of climate change and its need to be addressed. Take the United States as an example of a major player on the world stage whose record on climate change is mixed. In the U.S, roughly 40% of its population believes that climate change is either a minor threat or not a threat at all. (Pew Research Center 2019) This is troubling, particularly considering that the United States is consistently one of the world’s largest emitters of carbon dioxide and producers of hydrocarbons, and that the government’s response to climate change is often politically fraught and ideologically motivated: depending on who runs the Environmental Protection Agency or passes laws, the United States can swing like a pendulum, shifting ever more left and right without stopping at the middle. Even in countries where the majority of citizens recognize and accept climate change as a major threat like in South Korea, it is still difficult to take the politics out of policy or ideology out of ideas without

triggering criticisms of being alarmist, over-reacting, or, perhaps most difficult of all, greeted with a general “it doesn’t matter” reaction.

Moser and Dilling (2011) argue that there are generally four reasons why communicators of climate change have not been effective, namely that they assumed

“(1) a lack of information and understanding explains the lack of public engagement; (2) fear and visions of potential catastrophes as a result of inaction would motivate audiences to action; (3) the scientific framing of the issue would be most persuasive and relevant in moving lay audiences to action; and (4) mass communication is the most effective way to reach audiences on this issue.” (p. 162)

In other words, there lies an opportunity in the changed way audiences and communicators receive and send information, nuance, and context, and I argue that the younger generations are increasingly mastering the craft of saying much with shortform media. One of the key roles that youth can have is fighting back against misinformation and erroneous information through their tech-savvy, infotainment-oriented style of communication: in a world where both lighthearted fun and very serious content like news, research, or politics is cut down into one-minute videos, summarized in 140 characters, or put to music with subtitles and captions as thousands “heart” the content, there is a strong potential for younger individuals, the majority age demographic on such social media sites and culture, to make an outsized impact. Though it may sound silly to a serious researcher, why not tailor the pitch to the audience, the vast majority of whom do not possess advanced degrees in science or government, find it difficult to understand how global “warming” also leads to colder winters, or are increasingly less open to believing those who do? While those of us who think about climate change, policy for “net zero” carbon emissions, and weigh the pros and cons of particular technologies or policies, we must absolutely keep in mind that for the vast, vast majority of

people around the world, they simply don't have the energy, the capacity, or the will to care enough to force themselves to slog through difficult and dense material surrounding the science and limitations of both climate change and our responses to it. We have a tendency, particularly in the academic sphere, to scoff at or brush off those who seem unwilling or unable to learn about this important issue and dismiss "the masses;" however, despite all the shortcomings and drawbacks of the Age of Social Media and short-form content, there are opportunities for concerned and savvy youth to use these platforms in an endearing, fun way to get across the message that climate change is real, that it is important, and that it can affect us all, and there are encouraging signs that these opportunities exist. Some influencers write and sing catchy songs, others share tips on upcycling or thrift, while still others provide fascinating glimpses of what is at stake when climate change is unmanaged with videos of exotic wildlife or vistas. According to TikTok, climate-related content on its platform received more than 20 billion views globally; factoring in that TikTok has around one billion active users, that means on average every person viewed 20 different climate change shorts, though of course the content of and stripe of the context will differ by video. Still, it is a sign that we can attempt to correct misinformation, provide new information, and encourage people to go out and learn about the options and policies available to us about net zero carbon emissions.

This leads to the second point about reaching net zero carbon emissions. Again, discussing and implementing policies which move us towards greener energy or investing large sums of money into carbon capture technologies are incredibly important; however, again, we must keep in mind just how small our community of likeminded climate activists actually is, and that it is the masses, rather than ourselves, with whom we need to primarily engage daily. We must remember that though government can help propel net-zero carbon targets, it is the average person and their associated groups which choose the government. I believe keeping them engaged is also within the reach of the younger generations as well by consistently

providing engaging content about how climate change affects particular groups and populations, and also providing information about how particular policies can affect those groups in very targeted ways. It also helps by matching the audience with the messenger, and experimental research has found that tailoring the message to the audience's own values can make them more receptive to the science and message of climate change; Wolsko (2017) finds, for example, that "conservatives' pro-environmental attitudes substantially increased after an appeal to binding and liberty moral concerns" with some vignettes about religion. Pointing out the health problems of climate change that are acutely feared or well understood can motivate change as well. For example, understanding that much of the fine dust that pollutes the air over South Korea and its health effects has had a substantial impact on both the average citizen and government policy: increasingly, South Koreans seem to be aware of the relationship between air pollution and the ultrafine dust comprised of industrial byproducts, and it is easier to convince someone to support policies to go net-zero carbon by pointing to the sick than by trying to float a more abstract, less easily grasped concepts. The youth of the world can, again, take it upon themselves to claim this responsibility. Consider the vast amount of subcultures on the Internet, then consider that the majority of Internet users probably ascribe to at least two or three different such subcultures. Why not have young creators and content-makers make use of their understanding of those communities or cultures to communicate messages about climate change and the importance of net zero emissions? Who better to answer the gruff questions of motorcycle enthusiasts about electric or increasing regulations on emissions than a fellow, environmentalist biker? The youth are there and already eagerly participating: we just need to channel their attention and their energy towards spreading information. We also need to expand the debate to include discussions of other greenhouse gases or dangerous practices, and we also need to have public opinion and pressure build away from the consumer-blaming models of emissions modeling like "carbon footprints" created in a boardroom at British

Petroleum or the “litterbug problem” with the now infamous “crying Indian” PSA; in the modern age, I have yet to find a better, more efficient and cheap method with which to organize people than social media.

Thirdly, it is up to the young to combat the increasing skepticism in the world today from all sides surrounding the debates of sustainable growth, resources, and net-zero carbon policies. As mentioned previously, some may find it difficult to reconcile their dislike of fossil fuel companies with their financial support and backing of carbon capture technology companies and may let their bias color their perceptions. Though I do not argue that it is hard to accept that there is a purely altruistic motive from those hydrocarbon producers and sellers, I also have to acknowledge that at the very least, they are investing money into a technology which may help states, particularly those still developing, with their SDG goals or the net zero carbon emissions goals; while absolute zero emissions should be the eventual goal for us all, we must constantly remind ourselves that the majority of the world’s nations and peoples still have a long way to go in human development before they can even truly consider beginning to weight the balance of priorities towards sustainable, environmentally-friendly policies. Therefore, while the cynicism may be well founded, spending too much time criticizing without also acknowledging the potential benefits helps no one and instead pushes us all further apart. States and international organizations have called for “net zero” for a reason, and while cynics may roll their eyes as they argue it is simply a ploy for time or cover to do less, I argue that it is the maximum we can do without seeing mass defections from climate agreements or commitments to a carbon-free future. We must not let perfect be the enemy of the good; any reduction is a start, and although we may be panicking at what appears to be a bleak prospect, we need to remember that we are not sitting on our hands doing nothing. Industrious inventors work tirelessly to come up with the next great emissions-reducer, and concerned citizens and activists do their best in classrooms, boardrooms and town halls across the world to try and

keep us all informed and aware. Let me repeat: we must not let perfect be the enemy of the good.

Youth always has the benefit of time, of a future so far away it seems untouchable and unlikely that it should ever become the present. Yet climate change and policies meant to reverse it are not likely to run on the timetable of the young, and what we, the younger generations, do now will define the world in twenty, thirty years when we are no longer young ourselves. So, I argue we should do what all of us can do and often do most and best: sharing information and sharpening our messaging so that all of us are better able to engage with the debates shaping net-zero carbon policies, and to have a say in our own futures.

Work Cited

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