

# Here Today: Thoughts on Communicating Climate Change

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Climate change represents one of the most serious global issues of our time, yet it is also the most difficult to communicate and make relevant to people's everyday lives, particularly in western societies. The urgency with which we need to address human induced climate change is certainly not replicated by government action, large-scale social changes, or the quantity and depth of news media coverage of the issue. As the UK Met Office identify the last 10 years as being the warmest since records began in 1850, we need to ask, how can we better communicate climate change as a pressing concern, and how can we make it more meaningful to the cultures and values of people's everyday lives?

Academic research in the social sciences and media studies has shown that whilst images of polar bears, melting glaciers, retreating polar ice caps, floods, droughts and hurricanes circulating in the mass media have helped to provide important visual evidence of the impacts of climate change, they have done very little to encourage people to address this issue.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, such images, particularly those of melting glaciers and polar bears, often serve to make climate change seem a distant and future threat, rather than something that is occurring in the here and now.<sup>2</sup> Given the urgency of addressing climate change, we need to perceive it as a present reality rather than a future possibility.

So what makes climate change such a difficult issue to comprehend? Both temporally and spatially complex, climate change presents difficulties for understanding and communicating.<sup>3</sup> The science of climate change explains that since the nineteenth century industrial revolution, increased greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) have contributed to an increase in global temperatures (and continue to do so), as heat remains trapped within the earth's atmosphere, causing climatic changes. Yet, as a long-term problem, the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions on global temperatures - and the effect this has upon aspects of the climate such as rainfall, sea levels and extreme weather - are not immediate: they are incremental and develop over time. There is a time lag between the release of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere and their discernible effect upon the earth's ecosystems.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See O'Neill, S. and Hulme, M., 2009. 'An iconic approach for representing climate change', *Global Environmental Change*, 19, 402-410

<sup>2</sup> See O'Neill, S and Nicholson-Cole, S. 2009. 'Fear won't do it: Promoting positive engagement with climate change through visual and iconic representations', *Science Communication* 30:3, 355-379.

<sup>3</sup> Beck, U., 1992. *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> Adam, B., 1998. *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*. London: Routledge

Human induced climate change is also spatially complex, and is a global issue. Whilst historically, western and developed countries have contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions, it is those living in the developing countries who are suffering the most from climatic changes. Added to these temporal and spatial complexities (and inequities) is the fact that we cannot see climate change, we can only see its effects, or symptoms. In a western culture dominated by visual media, this presents problems for the forms of visual representation that are prioritised - such as video/film footage and photography - which seek to document the visible present.

Comprehending the urgencies of climate change is not simply a question of understanding or communicating the science better (although this would certainly help). How climate change is perceived – both individually and collectively - depends upon how it is made socially and culturally meaningful to particular audiences. Climate change exists as a physical reality *and* as a range of social and cultural meanings, which guide our perceptions of the issue, and the nature and urgency of our actions (or inactions). Knowledge and understanding of climate change is communicated and mediated through a range of social and cultural forms, including science, the environmental movement, media representations, politics and popular culture.<sup>5</sup> As such, we need a wide range of social and political actors, such as artists, designers, educators, media practitioners, activists and community groups (to name but a few), who can communicate climate change and help locate this issue in the consciousness and practices of people's everyday lives.

In order to situate climate change within people's consciousness and daily lives, we need to understand some of the ways in which our understanding of climate change has been shaped by particular forms of knowledge and representational practices. The interrelated concepts of *nature*, *vision* and *time*, and their centrality to the production and communication of scientific and environmental knowledge, need to be examined in order to understand the difficulties they have posed in making climate change both 'real' and meaningful.<sup>6</sup> In particular it is the separation of humans from nature and the environment which is at the crux of these difficulties. This separation needs to be explored and questioned to facilitate new forms of communication, as a means of generating more urgent action.

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<sup>5</sup> See Hulme, M., 2009. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Boykoff, M., 2011. *Who Speaks for Climate? Making Sense of Media reporting on Climate Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> See Doyle, J. 2011. *Mediating Climate Change*. Farnham: Ashgate.

## Conceptualising climate change

### Nature

Climate change emerged as an environmental concern during the mid 1980s, yet it is an issue that not only crosses, but calls into question, the conceptual boundaries between humans and environment, and between nature and culture, because climate change affects, and is affected by, humans. Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the environment has been predominantly conceptualised as the observable natural world, a set of objects spatially separate from humans and culture.<sup>7</sup> This creates and reinforces distinctions and power relations between, for example, culture/nature and human/animal. Unfortunately, in their defence of the environment, environmentalists have historically reinforced this conceptual division, presenting humans as doing damage to a nature comprised of landscapes and animals.<sup>8</sup> Representing climate change as an environmental issue has led to particular ways of understanding it, which have proven problematic for mobilising action. For example, images of polar bears and melting glaciers, the dominant representations of climate change circulating in the mass media, present climate change as impacting upon animals and landscape, rather than affecting, and being affected by, the daily practices of human activity (from the food and clothes we buy, to the transport we take).

### Vision

Central to the division between humans and nature is an investment in the visible as evidence of truth. Firstly, vision as a form of truth is central to the production of scientific knowledge, with its focus upon empirical (visible) evidence.<sup>9</sup> Climate change, as an invisible and latent problem, poses difficulties for its identification and validation as a real threat, as it lacks visual evidence. Secondly, vision is central to the production of nature/culture distinctions which have characterised scientific and environmental knowledge since the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Seeing and visualising the environment equate to understanding and valuing it: a visual aesthetics that has been promoted and inscribed through landscape painting, photography, mass media imagery and, since the 1960s, satellite images of the earth from space.<sup>11</sup> Current photographs of how climate change impacts upon the landscape illustrate this continued objectification of nature, arguably at the expense of a more complex understanding of humans as an

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<sup>7</sup> Ingold, T. 1993. 'Globes and Spheres: The Topology of Environmentalism', in Kay Milton (ed) *Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology*. London: Routledge.

<sup>8</sup> Doyle, J., 2007. 'Picturing the Clima(c)tic: Greenpeace and the Representational Politics of Climate Change', *Science as Culture* 16:2, 129-150.

<sup>9</sup> See Adam, B. 1998; Plumwood, V., 2002. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge

<sup>10</sup> Macnaghten, P. and Urry, J. 1998. *Contested Natures*. London: Sage

interdependent part of the environment.

### Time

'Tick, tick, tick.....', 'Countdown to Copenhagen', '100 months to save the world'. These are all climate campaign messages that seek to render visible the passing of time, and measure time as a way of generating climate action in the present. Yet, our understanding of time as quantities of minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years makes time predictable, uniform, and seemingly controllable. This understanding of time, called clock time, is at odds with how time operates within our environment. Organic environmental time is rhythmic, cyclical, and interconnected. In contrast, clock time, as a product of science, fixes time, making it singular, finite and isolated from the processes of life.<sup>12</sup> Due to the time lags in environmental feedbacks, it can take 30-40 years for the effects of climate change to materialise,<sup>13</sup> to be made visible. The effects of greenhouse gases emitted in the present will only be visible in the future, while the impacts we 'see' in the present are the result of emissions in the past. Such periods of latency do not fit with the focus upon the visible present within scientific knowledge and in popular cultural and media representations of the environment. Not understanding the differences between clock time and environmental time means that we fail to comprehend that the effects of climate change develop and accumulate (often invisibly) over time, in a non-linear and spatially complex way. We need to understand these different concepts of time in order to engage more effectively with the urgencies of climate change, not as a distant future, but as a future that is present in the now.

### **Rethinking climate change**

If climate change has moved beyond the primary concerns of scientists and environmentalists in the 1980s to now become a mainstream issue, but this concern is not translating into positive concerted action, then it is time for our perceptual framework (how we think, understand and imagine) to be questioned and transformed. But change in thought can only come from an understanding of how our thinking about climate change is shaped in the first place. Acknowledging the spatial and temporal complexity of climate change, which can often make the issue feel distant and future oriented, as well as questioning some of the limitations of the representational practices used to communicate it, such as dramatic film or

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<sup>11</sup> Ingold, T. 1993.

<sup>12</sup> See Adam, B., 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Hale, S., 2008. *The New Politics of Climate Change: Why We are Failing and How We Will Succeed*. London: Green Alliance.

photographic footage of climate impacts on animals and landscapes, means that we can find more engaging ways of communicating climate change as something that is present in the here and now. In doing so, humans, including our thoughts, values and actions, become embedded within the environments we live in, and of which we are an integral part.

The world as we know it will be (and is being) fundamentally altered by climate change, with increasingly severe and unpredictable weather patterns, conflicts over the use of natural resources, the collapse of infrastructures, and the global migration of people as climate refugees. While this is a reality, how we understood this reality and choose to act upon this knowledge is shaped by how we perceive the issue. If climate change is framed as an issue of social justice, then the human costs of climate change are brought to the fore. Framing climate change as a humanitarian and social justice issue constitutes a moral imperative to act.

The way we communicate about climate change *matters*. The mainstream environmental movement has already begun to call for a transformation of its own approaches to climate change communication and action, through its acknowledgement that climate change can no longer simply be framed as an environmental issue.<sup>14</sup> Climate change is also a humanitarian issue, not only affecting access to natural resources, but also impacting upon human health, and transforming the social and cultural practices which form the basis of human societies, changing how we act, think, feel and live.

Climate change poses fundamental questions about what it is to be a human within a rapidly changing world, and about what we value, what our norms are, and how these are culturally and socially shaped. As individualism has become the dominant ideology within contemporary consumer societies, shaping the symbolic and social structures of institutions and everyday lives, the need to think and act collectively on climate change appears particularly difficult – but not impossible. We need to feel engaged in the present, and embodied as active citizens. How climate change is defined and how it is given meaning shapes how individuals and groups are called upon to take action. Getting the balance right between communicating the dangers of climate change and engaging the public and politicians to act is a difficult one.<sup>15</sup>

We need to call upon our imaginations to rethink our relationship with climate change. We need to think and feel climate change, not as an entity to be observed in the distant future, or

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<sup>14</sup> See WWF-UK, 2008. *Weathercocks and Signposts: The Environmental Movement at a Crossroads*. Surrey: WWF-UK.

<sup>15</sup> Moser, C. and Dilling, L., 2004. 'Making Climate Hot: Communicating the Urgency and Challenge of Global Climate Change', *Environment*, December 2004, 32-46.

in faraway environments, but as an integral part of human culture and daily life. In doing so, we can begin to understand how our social values and daily practices are part of the causes of and solutions to climate change. As communicators – from educators and journalists, to community groups and artists – we need to make climate change a pressing matter in the here and now, activating all of our senses to make it more embodied and ‘real’. This is the necessary basis for action.

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