Strategic Climate Change Communications

Effective Approaches to Fighting Climate Denial

Edited by

Jasper Fessmann

Climate Change and Society

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"The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – 'the one less traveled by' – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth."

Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, 1962.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the contributing authors. Each of them graciously gave their chapter to this book because they feel passionate about the dangers of global warming and wanted to offer practical solutions.

This book was written by activists and scholars to help activist communicators and environmental journalists to become more strategic and thus more effective. It is intended to help the environmental journalists to better resist manipulation by professional climate denial communicators using the science of public relations (PR) to promote vested interests. Although these "black sheep" of PR only represent a small subset of PR professionals (who mostly strive hard to work ethically) their work had an enormous impact on climate change – stymying meaningful progress on the issue for over three decades through highly effective strategic communications. A central tenet of the book is that these same PR skills and strategies used by deniers are some of the best weapons to fight the negative narratives generated by the climate change deniers.

The authors (alphabetical order):

- **Cynthia Barnett** - Environmental journalist and author specializing in water and climate, and Environmental Journalist in Residence at the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications. Besides many science and environmental articles, she has written three books: *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.; Blue Revolution: Unmaking America's Water Crisis* and *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History.*

- **John Cook, PhD** - Research Assistant Professor at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University and founder of the Skeptical Science website. He is the co-author of three books: *Climate Change: Examining the Facts; Climate Change Science: A Modern Synthesis* and *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand.*

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- **Naomi Oreskes, PhD** - Professor of the History of Science and Affiliated Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Harvard University.

Thank you all!

Jasper Fessmann
Editor

Foreword: Climate Truths in a Post-Truth World

Cynthia Barnett

As I write in the fall of 2018, Hurricane Florence has swept out of North Carolina, but the heartbreak of flooding from coastal surge and the 10 trillion gallons of rain the storm dumped on America's Piedmont will surely last a generation. More than 50 people have died, including in drownings; numerous bridges and roads are washed away; hog lagoons and coal-ash pits have spilled dangerous waste into inland rivers; those rivers have breached countless rural towns; cotton, corn and other crops are sunk in billion-dollar farm losses; and more than 700,000 residential and commercial properties lay damaged in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia (Centopani, 2018).

All from a Category 1 hurricane. As the floodwaters recede, a number of scientific and data analyses point to a number of ways that climate change made the impacts of Florence much worse: Computer models show the catastrophic rains were 50 percent worse due to warmer temperatures in the atmosphere and seas. One in five homes swamped by the storm surge would have stayed dry if not for climate-driven sea-level rise, another study found (Crimmins et al., 2016; Reed, Stansfield, Wehner, & Zarzycki, 2018).

For the people of the Piedmont, the misery in the noxious floodwaters has also been made worse by climate denial: For six years in North Carolina, it has been illegal for policymakers to use up-to-date computer models to plan for rising seas in coastal development. Real estate, homebuilders and other business interests pushed the 2012 law to ensure Tar Heel building permits would not be slowed by a state commission report that showed sea-levels could rise as much as 39 inches by 2100. The report was meant to "take a hard look at this long-term problem," and help North Carolina adapt to a warming world, one of its authors, East Carolina University professor Stanley Riggs, told the *New York Times*. But, "we blew it" (Schwartz & Fausset, 2018, par 4). The 2012 law and subsequent action – and nonaction – by North Carolina's state government weakened coastal development policies and environmental regulations at just the time citizens needed more protection from rising seas, extreme rains other risks heightened by climate change.

North Carolina's legislated denial is but a portrait in miniature of the large-scale white-washing of climate science underway in the United States. The white-washing far predates U.S. President Donald Trump, though in him it has found one of its most-ardent fabulists. The president has called climate change a "hoax" and has directed rollback of dozens of environmental and climate regulations in the very same years Americans are beginning to endure the consequences of warming, from worsening storms and wildfires to increasing incidents of harmful algal blooms to spikes in childhood asthma and more heat-related deaths.

Indeed, widespread white-washing of science is not new; denial dates at least to Galileo's conviction on heresy for arguing the Earth could not be center of the Universe. But one hundred years ago, a new industry called public relations would prove so skilled at it that scientific facts would fall as precipitously as in Galileo's time. Science has never recovered. And neither has truth.

Ivy Ledbetter Lee – "a paid liar," Carl Sandburg called him – was a founder of the emerging field, which he alternately called "publicity" and "propaganda." As he explained the latter term: "The effort to propagate ideas." In 1914, Lee set out to propagate a better image for J.D. Rockefeller Jr., who had been vilified in the press, particularly by muckraker Ida Tarbell in her *McClure's* magazine series on "The History of Standard Oil." Lee produced a series of credible bulletins – later collected into a book called *Facts* – that succeeded in turning around the Rockefeller narrative in newspapers and the public consciousness (Lepore, 2018).

In reality, though, "Lee argued that facts don't exist, or at least, they can't be reported," writes the Harvard historian Jill Lepore in *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018). "The effort to state an absolute fact is simply an attempt to achieve what is humanly impossible," Lee pronounced in a speech to journalism teachers in the 1920s. "All I can do is to give you my interpretation of the facts."

Rather, paying customers' interpretations of the facts. Like today, even weather disasters, themselves, were up for interpretation. When the deadliest hurricane in Florida's history roared through South Florida in September 1928, the Red Cross reached out nationally for donations to help victims, which included about 18,000 homeless families. The organization tapped President Calvin Coolidge to appeal to Americans to help "the great suffering which now needs relief and will need relief for days to come." Florida real estate and railroad interests were horrified the news would slow the 1920s land boom, which had already begun to collapse. They took out full-page ads in newspapers across the United States denying the scope of the disaster. Titled "The Truth About Storm Damage In Florida," one ad, like Lee's book of *Facts*, established credibility in the form of personal testimony: "Florida – the

world's winter playground – with its unmatched climate, its fertile soil which has no superior, the length of the seasons, its freedom from the rigors of winters, all will continue to prosper and grow, and the area affected by this storm will take on a new aspect, *profiting by the experience gained*." The at least 2,500 dead, and many more thousands homeless, would not appear to be profiting. The Red Cross estimated the propaganda cut into its budget for helping storm victims by at least a third (Drye, 2018).

That crass distortion could not help Florida's thinning real estate bubble, any more than the next crass PR campaign – on behalf of the tobacco industry – could save one of the estimated 7 million people globally who die each year from cigarette smoking. In the 1930s, the presidents of America's four largest tobacco companies turned to public relations to challenge the emerging science that cigarettes could kill. They hired one of the nation's top PR firms, Hill and Knowlton. The firm's founder and CEO, John Hill, set about "to deceive the American public about the health effects of smoking," as the U.S. Department of Justice later put it. Spinning existing science and funding new research to raise questions in smokers' minds, writes the Harvard historian of science Naomi Oreskes in *Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes, & Conway 2011), the campaign succeeded by highlighting doubt. "Scientific doubts must remain," John Hill declared.

His company spent the next half-century making sure of it.

Many of the same scientists hired in the tobacco campaign, and the scientific-sounding organizations that it spawned, were later active in casting doubt on the scientific evidence for numerous other environmental and public health hazards. These included acid rain, the ozone hole, the industrial chemicals exposed by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*, and now, perhaps most devastatingly, the science of climate change (Michaels, 2008).

From casting the careful researcher Carson as "hysterical" half a century ago to claiming the rise in earth's temperatures is "natural" today, manipulative publicity has caused the planet untold harm. Now, the strengthening field of public interest communications aims to deploy strategy on behalf of a better world as deftly – or more so – as those who would plant denial in the science of smoking and carbon emissions.

Those communicating professionally on behalf of a better world have always been there, too; Carson was one of them. Her monumental conclusions about the impacts of synthetic chemicals on the web of life were first informed by her work as a writer for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (now the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). During sixteen years with the Service, she wrote numerous pamphlets, radio scripts and bulletins on conservation, including a popular series called Conservation in Action ("Rachel Carson: A Conservation Legacy", n.d.).

The problem, explains Jasper Fessmann in his history of public interest communications (2018a), is that development of sophisticated communications strategy for private vested interests has not (yet) been matched in the public sphere. And journalism, rather than becoming savvier to such strategy, has become ever more vulnerable amid financial strain and deep layoffs. There are approximately six public relations professionals for every journalist (Schneider, 2018), a gap that has widened as newsroom employment in the United States dropped 23 percent between 2008 and 2017. Nearly two hundred studies of the relationship between the fields reveal that between half and 75 percent of media content either comes directly from or is significantly influenced by public relations, finds the mass communications scholar Jim Macnamara (2016).

The complex threat of climate change churns this mediascape into something of a perfect storm. It is a test for public-interest communicators and journalists alike; no less than a test for the viability of truth in a post-truth world. In the chapters that follow, Fessmann and other public interest communicators well-describe the amoral, billion-dollar strategy underway to keep climate denial in the American mind, and what can be done to overcome it. Even a hint of doubt is all it takes for industry to make its case against regulations, now being repealed at breakneck speed. The Trump Administration has scrapped America's Clean Power Plan to reduce the emissions causing climate change; repealed methane rules; nullified federal rules on coal power plants; weakened fuel economy rules and car emissions standards; cut numerous climate- and renewable-energy research programs; loosened regulations on toxic air pollution; and expelled the words "climate change" from websites and emergency-management plans in one of the most expensive years of natural disasters in modern U.S. history.

Such actions are dangerous enough, Fessmann says, that we should consider ourselves at war with denial (2018b); that, after all, is how some polluting industry sees its battle against regulation. As traditional PR uses strategy, tactics and objectives that originated in strategic military science, he argues, a better understanding of such thinking is crucial for practitioners of public-interest communications, for scientists and for the journalists who cover climate change and its impacts.

At the very least, Fessmann argues, journalists and scientists must be sophisticated in their ability to recognize PR strategy, in order to bring light to the truths that it is trying to obscure. Specialization in Environmental Journalism is an important part of that effort. The better journalists' training and expertise, the better equipped they are to report on peer-reviewed science; avoid the false balance offered up by manipulative publicists; recognize greenwashing and front think-tanks; and treat press releases as tips rather than storylines.

The truth does, ultimately, come out. Seven million people die of lung cancer in a year's time. The rising floodwaters drown a place that's always been dry. The Florida real estate bubble bursts. The real estate on Nag's Head falls into the sea. The question raised in these chapters is whether we can expose such truths before the deaths. Before the flood. Before the building collapse. Before the real-estate speculation spins out of control. That is the goal of scientists in their search for solutions. It is the goal of journalists as cogs in our creaky Democracy. And it is the goal of Fessmann and the other authors in this volume, a new generation of communicators becoming ever-more strategic for the good of people, the good of the Earth.

Contrary to Lee, facts exist. When harsh facts like those involving climate change are well-understood, we can protect ourselves, working on clean-energy plans, shoring up our coastlines, building resilience for future generations. When facts are suppressed, they come roaring at us in surprise; like Hurricane Michael, just short of Category 5, a storm that strengthened unusually rapidly before it devastated parts of the Florida Panhandle as this volume went to press -- a perfect storm for the history books.

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Editor's Introduction: Climate Change Communications in the Age of Trump

Jasper Fessmann, PhD

Background and goal

The idea for this book emerged from a 2015 panel discussion at the University of Florida with Dr. Naomi Oreskes, eminent Professor of History of Science at Harvard University. The key insight gained from the debates with Naomi Oreskes and Cynthia Barnett was that journalists, climate activists and scientists are not usually trained in strategic communications but need to be. Currently, they are often outspent and outstrategized – and sometimes even unaware when they or their audiences are deliberately manipulated – by professional strategic communicators.

The book that has emerged here is not a comprehensive guide to climate change communications. Instead, it is a collection of spotlights on critical aspects of the issue with some roadmaps for specific approaches which each can have a direct impact on averting the looming global warming catastrophe through effective strategic communications.

It offers an overview of some of the most crucial issue in climate change communications and explores some specific areas where good public interest communications can move the needle on global warming. However, the book makes no claim to be comprehensive – unfortunately many areas and insights by great scholars and practitioners necessarily remained unexplored.

As a 20-year public relations veteran and educator, I see much of the global warming debate in the USA as a series of chess moves and countermoves in a communications war for public opinion. From this point of view, the climate change denial side is being very strategic and understands the rules, but unfortunately the public interest side often plays haphazard and without a strategy.

For most activists and scientists, this lack of strategy in communications is due to an overall lack of formal or informal communications training. In contrast, journalists are highly trained communicators but are not usually trained in strategic communications—this is seen as the domain of advocacy and

public relations (PR) that they try to keep at arm's length. This means that at best, journalists' efforts to report on climate change and inspire action on solutions are limited to the tactical level.

Strategy defines long-term goals and the plan to achieve them—a roadmap for how to win a communications war (Fessmann, 2018). Tactics focus on individual engagements, specific plans, initiatives and specific parts of an issue. When tactics are not coordinated in accordance with strategy, they may have a short-term positive impact on long-term goals, but these gains may be offset when they are mismatched with other efforts at the tactical level. Uncoordinated tactics may even be harmful to the overall strategy. As the ancient Chinese General Sun Tzu (1910) put it, strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.

A good example of tactics without strategy in climate communications is Al Gore's 2006 movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. It was tactically brilliant, inspiring millions of people and substantially raised awareness of the threat of global warming. However, strategically it lacked the follow through and planning to have a meaningful long-term impact on the global warming issue, increasing perceptions of threat without offering a roadmap forward. Because it was associated with a Democratic vice president, it played a large role in opening the door for professional climate change deniers to turn global warming into a conservative wedge issue and making the topic fully partisan. Just a few years after the release of *An Inconvenient Truth,* public acceptance of the dangers of global warming actually *decreased* and only returned to 2006-2007 levels in the late 2010s. Thus, the film was a brilliant tactical victory, but a strategic defeat because it helped to animate a highly effective climate change counter-movement (CCCM) which negatively influenced large segments of the general public in the United States.

The goal of this book, then, is to help journalists, advocates and scientists understand how the war for the public opinion is being fought at the strategic level and how they can become more resilient against the communications onslaughts by professional global warming denial communicators in their work. Additionally, this book aims to provide journalism and communications educators with classroom material to prepare the next generation of journalists and other storytellers to be able to spot and protect themselves from manipulation by strategically-trained PR professionals working for vested interests—even if the journalists themselves are wary of using strategy due to their professional credos.

Overview

This book deliberately mixes chapters by great work of climate communications practitioners with highly relevant peer-reviewed academic articles. The

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