



## Climate and Sustainability Communication Campaigns

### *Introduction*

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Climate change represents a widespread threat to both humans and nonhumans and demands strong global responses and actions to mitigate them. Given the nature of these threats, communication scholars are in a unique position to contribute meaningfully to solutions and mitigation efforts by crafting effective public communication campaigns around climate change and sustainability. The articles included in this Special Section explore the various challenges and opportunities surrounding effective climate and sustainability communication campaigns. A primary aim of this Special Section is to move climate change communication scholarship beyond its early focus on media coverage of climate change. Instead, the focus is on research that operates in an updated paradigm and reality, acknowledging, for example, the blurring lines between informative and persuasive media content and between mass-produced and user-generated content. The articles were drawn from a special postconference jointly sponsored by the Environmental Communication, Political Communication, and Health Communication divisions of the International Communication Association and represent a diversity of theoretical and methodological viewpoints from international scholars.

*Keywords: climate change, sustainability, public communication campaigns, advocacy campaign*

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Anthropogenic climate change has now come of age as a widely recognized global risk and a profound peril to the health and well-being of humans and nonhumans alike (Hallegatte et al., 2016). It demands global responses and actions to reduce its threats (Beck, 2010). According to one recent analysis, climate legislation is unlikely without large, well-orchestrated, and sustained climate movement and climate action (Skocpol, 2013). The near future will likely witness a surge in climate and sustainability campaigns as environmental nongovernmental organizations, climate networks, municipalities, regional councils, and the like take action on climate change.

This Special Section on Climate and Sustainability Communication Campaigns engages with these challenges and opportunities by focusing on the potential for communication to help address issues of climate change. The Special Section grew out of a postconference cosponsored by the Environmental Communication, Health Communication, and Political Communication divisions at the 2015 International Communication Association meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico. We sought to tap the unique collaborations among the three divisions with a goal of bringing together diverse scholars to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the current state of, and the prospects for, climate and sustainability campaigns. Led by co-organizers Merav Katz-Kimchi and Lucy Atkinson, the postconference brought together an international group of communication scholars from across different subdisciplines who were conducting applied and theoretical research that could be useful to public communicators in the development of successful campaigns. This Special Section showcases this work to a broader audience.

A primary aim of the postconference was to move climate change communication scholarship beyond its early emphasis on media coverage of climate change. Instead, the focus was on research that operates in an updated paradigm and reality, acknowledging for example, the blurring lines between informative and persuasive media content and between mass-produced and user-generated content. We aim to understand the global and interconnected terrain of climate and sustainability campaigns waged by diverse actors across the world and targeting various audiences.

We define *campaign* broadly as a strategic course of action, undertaken during a predefined time limit, involving communication, which is carried out for a specific outcome (Rogers & Storey, 1987). Generally, we identify two types of campaigns: public communication campaigns and advocacy campaigns. Public communication campaigns are usually waged by institutional actors who attempt to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specific time period using an organized set of communication activities. A public communication campaign features "an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society" (Atkin & Rice, 2013, p. 3). Advocacy campaigns are often, though not always, waged by noninstitutional actors, aim for more systemic transformation, and seek to change external conditions such as a policy decision or project (Cox, 2013, p. 213).

The day-long postconference featured 19 studies from academics spanning the globe, with presenters from Australia, Singapore, Canada, and Denmark in addition to the United States. Studies were interdisciplinary and represent a multitude of methods, from social network analysis and experiments to depth interviews and discourse analysis. All presenters at the postconference were invited to submit their

work for consideration to this special issue. The six articles presented here were chosen after undergoing rigorous blind review and represent the diverse research that was showcased in Puerto Rico.

### **The Articles in This Special Section**

Focusing on audiences in Singapore, a quantitative study by Benjamin H. Detenber, Sonny Rosenthal, Youqing Liao, and Shirley S. Ho takes an audience segmentation approach to understanding how different groups of Singaporeans think about climate change and their inclination to undertake mitigating actions. Relying on latent class analysis, the results indicate there are three distinct groups or segments of Singaporeans: the concerned, the disengaged, and the passive. The study builds on the work done by Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, and Mertz (2011) that segmented U.S. audiences into “Six Americas” according to their views on climate change. The three Singaporean segments differ from those uncovered in the U.S., Australia and India, with implications for communication campaigns. As the authors note, given the different segments that emerged, it highlights the importance of developing contextually relevant communication campaigns that account for national idiosyncrasies when promoting understanding of and responses to climate change in different parts of the world.

Connie Roser-Renouf, Lucy Atkinson, Edward Maibach, and Anthony Leiserowitz analyze the underlying beliefs of green purchasing intentions in the United States. The authors draw on Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which was previously applied to political activism, and apply it to green purchasing. The authors report that the same key beliefs that underlie political activism related to climate change (i.e., belief that climate change is real, human caused, dangerous, and solvable) also explain consumer activism. These results are of import to communicators who can seek to stimulate green consumption by creating messages that generate concern about global warming and climate change and at the same time enhance beliefs about the power of individual and societal consumer action.

Kjerstin Thorson, Stephanie Edgerly, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, Yu Xu, and Luping Wang examine the People’s Climate March in 2014 as a case study of the use of social media in contemporary social movements. The focus is on the tension between the importance of creating a “big tent” for multiple stakeholders to voice their concerns while creating a coherent and impactful movement. Through a content analysis of tweets during the three days of the march, the authors report that the conversation around the march did not show bridges across personalized framings of the climate issue and that there was limited common vocabulary for talking about particularized concerns linked to the broader climate movement. In other words, the analysis shows a large but fragmented conversation about climate change, only faintly held by shared use of hashtags, such as #peoplesclimate. In addition, the study reports four qualitative case studies (350.org, Sierra Club, UniteBlue, and Mark Ruffalo) that reveal a diverse approach by each different organizations or individuals based on their own goals.

In a novel examination of vegetarianism and veganism, Boris H. J. M. Brummans, Pauline Hope Cheong, and Jennie M. Hwang explore the understudied role of nongovernmental organizations in helping to promote reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. Their case study looks at the intersection of

environmental communication and faith-based organizing by focusing on how youth volunteers of the Buddhist Compassion Relief (Tzu Chi) Foundation in Singapore enact a communication campaign promoting vegetarianism and mindful food consumption. Relying on data drawn from the group's Facebook page and semistructured interviews with group leaders, the authors identify three communicative practices used by volunteers to enact the campaign. Through affective embodiment (acting out Tzu Chi's values and principles), invocation (citing or quoting the group's leader, Cheng Yen), and transmediation (sharing their campaign stories across different linked and interactive platforms), the group's volunteers successfully advocated vegetarianism locally as well as globally. The study highlights the constructive and challenging aspects of faith-based environmental activism to promote sustainable living.

Stacy Rebich-Hespanha and Ronald E. Rice examine the use of visual frames for formative evaluation of climate change communication campaigns. They analyze climate change related themes and frames in a sample of 350 images from 1974 to 2009. The analysis generated 100 themes that were clustered into 15 frequent frames (e.g., government/politics/negotiations, climate science, temperature records). The authors argue that the understanding of existing frames can and should be used to inform climate change communication campaigns by designing visual elements that are aligned with the target audiences' characteristics and the goals of the campaign. The authors present a framework for public communicators that includes a series of steps for visual imagery in preproduction and production testing phases of formative evaluation.

In another qualitative study, Serena Carpenter, Bruno Takahashi, Carie Cunningham, and Alisa P. Lertpratchya explore how college and university stakeholders rely on social media to promote sustainability on campus. Relying on depth interviews with sustainability officers and student leaders at 21 universities, the data suggest these outreach efforts do incorporate social media to reach large audiences, but that communicators often underuse these channels or use them ineffectively. Notably, sustainability leaders tend to perceive social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, as useful for encouraging action and disseminating information, but they rarely turn to these same social media platforms as a means of building community around causes and groups. As well, the data highlight a relative lack of social media literacy—for example, how to measure the success of a sustainability communication campaign or how define a target audience. This shortcoming represents a hurdle for campus sustainability communicators to adopt best practices in public relations and strategic communication.

Taken together, these six studies represent a diversity of theoretical, methodological, and geographic emphases. On the one hand, this breadth underscores the need for sustainability and climate change communication scholarship to look beyond traditional areas of focus, like basic media coverage of climate change, to emerging avenues of communication, like social media, and alternative communication audiences, such as university students. This breadth also underscores the opportunities and exciting prospects for sustainability and climate change communication scholarship that goes beyond the status quo. As these six studies demonstrate, the field of sustainability and climate change communication is wide and diverse with exciting possibilities for scholars from all theoretical and methodological perspectives.

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