

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Discursive Constructions of Climate Change: Practices of Encoding and Decoding

Anabela Carvalho & Tarla Rai Peterson (Guest Editors)

One of the biggest challenges of the current century for governments, corporations, and citizens alike, climate change has garnered significant political attention worldwide. Over the last two decades, it has acquired a quasi-paradigmatic character, often standing for a diverse range of dilemmas plaguing the relations between humans and nature. It is, therefore, a central problem to environmental communication and consequently to this journal.

At the core of climate change are political, economic, and ethical choices with implications for the future of all species living on Earth. While the rate of global greenhouse gas emissions per person continues to rise and proposals for mitigation are faced with many forms of opposition, polls show widespread public concern with the issue, as well as high levels of willingness to pay for mitigation (BBC/PIPA/GlobalScan, 2007a, 2007b; Yale & George Mason, 2009). It seems clear that a primary communication challenge lies more in mobilizing a relatively aware constituency than in persuading more people to accept the scientific consensus. Communication scholars are well positioned to enhance our understanding of how the meanings of climate change are produced, reproduced, and transformed, and to shed light on relationships between discourses, interpretations, and social practices.

This issue responds directly to the challenges of motivation and mobilization by offering analyses of historical contexts, material and economic conditions, institutional settings, political initiatives, practices of resistance, and the theoretical significance of discursive formations surrounding climate change. The following articles analyze the meanings of climate change in the discourses of various social

Anabela Carvalho is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Minho. Tarla Rai Peterson is Professor of Environmental Communication at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Boone & Crockett Chair of Wildlife & Conservation Policy at Texas A&M University. Correspondence to: Anabela Carvalho, Departamento de Ciências da Comunicação, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal. Email: carvalho@ics.uminho.pt

actors and the media, and discuss the connections between its discursive and social representations. They explore how scientific, political, economic, and social dimensions of climate change are represented in discourses from Asia, Europe, and the Americas; and remind us of the multiplicity of social arenas where the meanings of climate change are created and challenged. The articles also illustrate the contribution of various theoretical and methodological traditions to understanding communication on climate change, such as rhetorical critique, content analysis, linguistics, and organizational communication.

Mellor's analysis of two legal and regulatory challenges faced by climate change documentaries in the UK reveals what is lost in atomistic and fragmented interpretations of media texts, and suggests a more holistic interpretative approach. Foust and O'Shannon Murphy examine US print media coverage of climate change to illustrate the potential political power of rhetorical framing, highlighting the inventional possibilities of apocalyptic rhetoric. Stephens, Rand, and Melnick present a content analysis of wind energy coverage in print media of targeted US states. They identify important regional variations in the salience of wind energy as a climate change mitigating technology, and framing of its relative risks and benefits. Moore provides an example of the potential influence of rhetorical framing in his analysis of rhetorical efforts by the Union of Concerned Scientists to discredit the Bush administration's reliance on uncertainty as justification for ignoring climate change. Nerlich and Koteyko use an ecolinguistic approach to identify lexical compounds in the language associated with a largely web-based social movement in the UK: Carbon Rationing Action Groups. They show how metaphorical frames are used to encourage members to contribute to climate change mitigation via individual actions. Prelli and Winters analyze climate change discourse drawn from evangelical Christians. Using Dryzek's approach to discourse mapping, they excavate potential points of identification between otherwise disparate religionists and environmentalists. Ihlen identifies the primary topics used by the world's largest corporations to talk about climate change. Based on his analysis of their non-financial reports, he concludes that, although the corporate sector has accepted climate change as highly salient, it has yet to seriously address the issue. In the Praxis section, DeLuca interviews Soenke Lorenzen, Greenpeace media analyst, who reflects on the organization's media strategies and campaigns on climate change. Lorenzen suggests that there is a growing public mobilization and a renaissance of the environmental movement. The second interviewee is Stefano Merlin, president of Instituto Ecológica, a Brazilian non-profit organization that has forged the concept of "Social Carbon" as a response to climate change. Interviewed by Reis, Merlin explains how "Social Carbon" incorporates social, economic and environmental concerns into carbon sequestration projects.

The subtitle of this issue—"Practices of Encoding and Decoding"—emphasizes the importance of research that looks beyond traditionally defined texts, into how they are embedded in social life and are subject to varying processes of interpretation. The paths ahead, the available options and political decisions related to climate change have been subjected to multiple discursive constructions and contestations by a number of social actors. Drawing on Stuart Hall's seminal article (1973) about

“Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse,” we aim to bring to the fore the processes of production, circulation and consumption of discourses on climate change. This also calls attention to the highly transient nature of meanings of the problem. Therefore, examining how discursive categories and language practices shape perceptions of climate change, public engagement, and political action is likely to remain both a significant research question and an “ethical duty” (Cox, 2007) for communication and other social sciences for many years to come.

Acknowledgements

Anabela Carvalho gratefully acknowledges the funding of the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia to the project “The Politics of Climate Change: Discourses and Representations” (POCI/COM56973/2004).

References

- BBC/PIPA/GlobalScan. (2007a). All countries need to take major steps on climate change: Global poll. Retrieved March 29, 2009, from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/sep07/BBCClimate_Sep07_rpt.pdf
- BBC/PIPA/GlobalScan. (2007b). Most would pay higher energy bills to address climate change says Global Poll. Retrieved March 29, 2009, from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/nov07/BBCClimate2_Nov07_pr.pdf
- Cox, R. (2007). Nature’s “crisis disciplines”: Does environmental communication have an ethical duty? *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 1, 5–20.
- Hall, S. (1973). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. CCCS Stencilled Occasional Paper No. 7, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University, Birmingham.
- Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. (2009). Climate change in the American mind: American’s climate change beliefs, attitudes, policy preferences, and actions. Retrieved March 29, 2009, from http://www.climatechangecommunication.org/images/files/Climate_Change_in_the_American_Mind.pdf