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UK Energy Research Centre

Breaking the Deadlock in Climate Change Communication

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Meeting Report

THE UK ENERGY RESEARCH CENTRE

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Session 1: The nature of the deadlock in climate change communication interview style conversations

Chris Rapley in discussion with Adam Corner about the psychological origins of the deadlock based on COIN's recent Climate Silence report and a follow-up that is forthcoming.

Chris Rapley identified four key factors in climate change communication:

1) There is a silence from scientists involved with climate science. In general, climate scientists are interested in scientific research and do not come into climate science to engage in political battles.

2) It is difficult [to break the deadlock in climate change communication] because It is a very difficult story to tell.

   - There is no silver bullet to say why science has concluded why humans have caused disruption to the climate system, as it is a very complex set of interactions. And it tends to be those who are in doubt who have a very simplistic view e.g. "it's just the sun, it has always happened, we'll adapt".

   - As climate change science is frequently contested, this raises anxiety amongst scientists and scientists in general who are not used to delivering a story that other people like to vigorously challenge.

- There are a number of ways to cherry pick, at the science to come to completely opposing conclusions, because of the inherent complexity of climate science. Therefore it really is a difficult story to tell.

- As Adam Corner said in COIN's recent Climate Silence report: 'Scientific facts are like words in dictionary, but you need to string them together to capture people's minds and imaginations'

3) Science doesn't have a single mouthpiece.

- Brands: Science does not have a brand, an agreed purpose, vision, values or package. Science has multiple voices and contexts; therefore, getting the message across is really difficult. Climate science needs a brand, an identifiable, coherent, robust, agenda that people can connect with to start the dialogue that everyone at this event wants to achieve.

4) Science policy interface

- Tendency to assume there is a linear model, knowledge speaks to power, and power produces policy. However this is not reality. The role of scientists in the policy arena needs to be clearer. Policy has pushed responsibility for arbitrating on policy onto the shoulders of the science community, when in fact all that science can do is inform policy. Responsibility for policy and accountability should be in the hands of the policy makers.

Adam Corner

- The role of science and scientists, the correct cultural infrastructure, is really critical.

- It is not just scientists not just communicating clearly about climate change, the silence is socially constructed.

- Carbon Brief conducted analysis of the recent national floods, and found that only 7% of thousands of articles mentioned climate change. It was also mentioned that with the perceived failure on UNFCCC negations, people have stopped talking so much about climate change. Amongst policy/politicians, all sorts of stuff pro climate change in DECC / DEFRA, but we don't hear much about them e.g. The Green Deal – the flagship policy regarding improving home efficiency hardly mentions climate change.

- There appears to be a real disconnect and people tend to actively not talk about certain issues [George Marshall will be launching a book in October on this issue called Don't Even Think About It – Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change]

Comments:

- Part of the problem of communication from science is because they don't want to get too deeply into the emotional side of it because they know what is really at stake.

- Perhaps one of the reasons why the public as a whole doesn't engage in climate change more substantively is because the reality is too painful to bear. That will be true when engaging people at a deeper level, but we are not even there yet.

- Psychosocial processes need to kick in first. There are no social cues from different representatives and communities telling us why climate change is important to our lives. The only representatives that do exist in the public realm people identify as 'not me' e.g. climate activists, there is nothing to connect with at that social level.

Discussion

Q: Has someone tried running carbon conversations for climate scientists/looking at the emotional side of it, and if not, should we?

A: A carbon conversation like event took place but it failed in its basic objective about opening people up to produce a better narrative, but was successful in exposing what the real problem was:

- Five practicing climate scientists were involved and they were exposed to the fact that their minds generate meaning in context. The skill of scientist is a mechanism to uncover objective truth, however by and large they wouldn't have thought to think about the way their mind comes to particular conclusions. The participants were taken through a set of experiences to recognise the flaws in their own thinking and put them together with a brander. However the climate scientists did not believe that they had a role to come up with a unified, coherent message, like a brand would.

Q: Do we need to record stories how climate scientists have acted in their personal lives?

A: some senior climate change scientists are very carbon intensive people around the world, therefore personal stories might not be that helpful.

Q: What about the ones who are not famous?

A: We should personalise the science. Around the world Sailor Ellen MacArthur told a different type of story when discussing her experiences and it was hugely successful.

A: Example of a colleague from the scientific community who was interviewed about floods, was asked by the interviewer if it was related to climate change. However they did not answer the question, in their opinion, their audience was their professional colleagues, but all it needed was an opinion, as that's all the 'non-science' audience wanted. A little narrative can really help.

Comment:

It is critical for people to access communication training. However, a scientist who had come to terms with personal life/science/emotion would still be bound by norms of science in society. Whilst the scientific community is struggling, it is not possible for it to move forward collectively. For example the latest IPCC Working Group 1 report is probably one of the most audited and peer reviewed documents ever, yet some scientists have still spoken out and said how poor it is. Personalising science can also have its negative impacts.

Comment:

- A BBC programme which was aired during the early floods of 2014 contained a climate science summary in regards to future impacts. The interviews after that section had the same message: it's the Environmental Agency's fault and the dredging will solve it. One of the comments was – it's going to be difficult for a while but once dredging is sorted it will be easier.

- Positive framing: It is important to achieve a holistic picture. In these situations you get lots of quick reactions, and looking for a visible scapegoat, there is a need to understand what is energising those negatives and attempt to help others to view the whole picture. Immediate narratives are looking for an enemy, even though we all use energy, EA not dredging the rivers makes them an easy scapegoat.

- Furthermore another example of negative framing would be the Daily Mail mentioning the money for helping victims of the UK flooding should come from the government AID budget. They manage to fit the narrative into their own agenda. It is difficult to place long-term climate change narratives in front of much more immediate options.

Comment:

- Talking to people affected by flooding there is no narrative that exists that is positive. Everyone understands that it is happening more frequently but there is no next step to talk about climate change. Need to achieve a level of moral acceptance of the issue

the same way the public discusses the NHS: not everyone agrees on solutions, but

one can still talk about it around the dinner table.

Session 2a: The potential of psycho-social approaches to help break the deadlock

Renee Lertzman (video recording)

Psychosocial is not a homogenous discipline, it is composed of different takes of what it means to be psycho-social, it is about what we are experiencing psychologically/emotionally including our identity and emotions with the social context of which we live. There is an emphasis on narrative research, telling stories, and decoding what people are really saying. It is important to understand how people are really experiencing these issues. It offers a way to look at when there is anxiety, presence of loss, expectation of change – how one relates with implications of climate change. This will result in defensiveness.

There are very high stakes in these orientations – as we consider what psychosocial research has to offer whom.

The Map:

- Attempt to identify dominate ways of thought/thinking about psychology of climate change, which directly relates to how to break the deadlock in climate change communications.

- Be mindful of where the psychosocial lives in this map.

- Psychosocial has been underutilised, underrepresented, it needs to be brought out. It means collaborations across these four sections.

- Final thought: How does one cross over these epistemic landscapes? It is about integration – each area is limited in part without the other areas' expertise and understanding.

Karen Henwood

- Caution against underestimating the challenges.

- In order to avoid sterile debate, there is a need to rise to some of the challenges.

- Agree there is a need to focus on carefully thought through, well designed studies of life experiences across different theoretical perspectives.

- Book recommendation: Engaging with Climate Change, Renee's chapter.

Two key questions:

- What does it mean to pay attention to discourse and narrative in psychosocial research?

- How to be confident as researchers about how affect is communicated. Not just in a scientific context but in a wider public discourse? What gets set in motion in everyday life and in and through time (biographically, generationally)?

Environmental objects are something that one needs to understand on a personal level.

However Renee's research suggests that people turn away from the pain of caring too much.

There are big ways of thinking and speaking that exist as dominant social/cultural

formations out there for example: imperialism, neo-liberalism. The latter shifts responsibility

of action from government onto individuals. The effects of cultural formations need to be

reflected on as to why people do not seem threatened by environmental destruction.

Paul Hoggett:

Huddlefield, a village on the edge of the Somerset Levels, has an action group who are

fighting proposals by Ecotricity who want to build four wind turbines on the levels. There is

an irony that with large parts of the Somerset Levels sinking under water, there are

community groups trying to prevent renewable developers that might in fact help prevent the

levels disappearing in the long term.

The action group's website contains moving stories about what the building of just four

turbines would mean to their lives: the idyllic dreams of these villagers, the environment that

they love, retirement plans. Seeing it destroyed takes those idyllic dreams away. Some people

can externalise their experiences of personal loss on to these particular types of events.

It is possible to see the opposition across the county, where you encounter the same

emotional NIMBYISM.

These affects, feelings of loss, are not just individualised but are structures of feeling that in any society actually exist at an organised level in society. They fuel certain kinds of developments in culture and politics. Environmental melancholia of grieving about the world changing around us may become increasingly powerful. Such as creating the moral panics as seen on the Somerset levels have come from this. This is then generally followed by populist politics.

Session 2 B Andy Brown in conversation with Sophy Banks and Julian Manley to provide a brief overview of how the psycho-social approach has informed Carbon Conversations

Andy Brown:

As an engineer, for years wrote reports for organisations about saving energy and money and also carbon. And often after the project nothing would happen. Therefore we wanted to understand why is it that nobody listens to this?

The carbon foot printing tool was developed first. Around five thousand participants were involved to talk about their impact, as they wanted to know more. There was a clear level of anxiety talking about climate change and thus the Carbon Conversations groups were developed to provide a safe space for people to talk about those things.

Originally it was focused around discussing top tips, practical actions that individuals could do, however it was discovered that there was more to it, that if people were passionate, the rest would follow naturally.

Sophy Banks:

Transitions started very unfocused. It was the women who came forward and mentioned that they think they should talk about their feelings and it evolved from there. It ended up

bringing together a huge personal growth movement about transformational change with the environmental permaculture movement, as there is a tendency for individuals to see the world in their own views.

Comment: How do you do it?

Response:

With Transitions, it was putting out a story that engages people to achieve transformational change. Biggest intuition was imaging a positive story, what if we meet the environmental challenges really well, what will our community look like in 30 years' time? This methodology opened up a different territory when this was used. It is a powerful invitation to discuss things around something positive. From these discussions it is then possible to unearth what the challenges are.

There was a need to make sure people can talk about loss, and what the future impacts could be e.g. on their children. This sensation was termed a 'peak oil' moment. Transitions are about helping people through that process so they are not overwhelmed.

Comment:

How do you cope with loss and positive futures at the same time?

Response (Andy Brown):

In general, most of the discussions do not spend a lot of time investigating the future, but more about dealing with the present, there is a huge amount of listening.

It is not possible to just tell people the answers, one needs to understand where participants are coming from, what they want to hear and do not want to hear, and to make sure that the space is provided to bring those into the discussion. The Carbon Conversations handbook contains lots of snippets and stories from the development trials.

Comment: Is story telling important?

Response:

Is in some places it is, it is shaped in the transitions that are picked up.

In some places there is resistance to include 'touchy feely' discussions – in other groups it can be highly respected and integrated into the process. Making space for conversations is really critical, whether its regarding digesting critical information who have capacity to deal with it, or if it's just about inviting participants to have a positive conversation about the future.

Some participants come with technical questions, e.g. what is the best boiler? Instead the question should be asked: why is one asking that question? Where are you coming from? The problem with behavioural campaigning is telling people what they already know. The

questions that should be asked are: What matters to you? Have you thought about what other things you can do?

It is important that Carbon Conversations is rolled out at the community level because every community will have different needs, desires and challenges to face.

Discussion

Q:

The issue of cultural awareness/self-awareness; whether one is an activist or academic they are part of a culture, with their own language and ways of speaking and preferred ways of doing things. That might not resonate with the culture of people that Carbon Conversations is attempting to engage with?

A:

One has many overlapping identities. That question of identity is complex for one person, let alone a community. It is important to find a way to engage people that is relevant in their community. In Carbon Conversations it is important for participants to understand they are the ones who know the context that they are situated in to start these conversations.

A:

Psychosocially, Carbon Conversations is trying to achieve a space as culturally and politically neutral as possible by tapping into emotions that we share.

Q:

What happens when one does not find common ground between participants?

Comment:

The degree of agency that participants feel makes a huge difference to how willing they are to take in information about climate change. When participants feel hopeless or individualised then they properly won't be taking in that information.

A:

In the USA one has to collaborate to get enough powerbase to challenge existing powers.

Useful to list people by the following categories to help strategize approaches:

1) Totally agree with you, make partnerships to not alienate them

2) Common ground but different agenda – this is the main focus of one's time and energy

3) "Indifference"

4) "The No's"

- Active opposition, for whom you need a strategy to make sure they are not undermining what one is trying to achieve.

Comment:

It is important to remember that for the opposition (those labelled as a 5) one will never change other people's minds – at least not while they are in front of you. One needs to make

sure that you do not back individuals into a corner, as they will not change their mind in public. One must give them room to have some reflective time in private.

Comment:

It's crucial in these contexts not to overstress the importance of individual action. Although Carbon Conversations is mostly a focus on the individual, it tends to avoid political collective solutions of a large scale. There could perhaps be a danger to that, which makes individuals feel they are responsible and that they must be the ones to do something about it. This could make people feel alienated and feeling incapable.

Comment:

A psychosocial approach wants to understand what people share unconsciously as well as consciously. This could provide an interesting insight into how to deal with people who strongly disagree. Social Dreaming – Palestinians and Israelis, a very polarised group however they did share some unconscious similarities such as having a better future for their children. Through the psychosocial approach perhaps it is possible to reach agreements that are not consciously expressed or that are unknown to the participants.

Comment:

Perhaps more time should be spent engaging with passive supporters, rather than active or passive defenders.

Comment:

If it is not possible to talk about climate change, then discuss the economy and health, as these are still valid and important points that climate change will impact. However, one should not ignore discussing climate change, as this is 'letting the sceptics win'

Comment:

Perhaps it should be more about credible involvement gradually. There should be an endurable transformation that happens over time, whereby participants feel this is a natural decision for them, which is for the long term rather than having someone who is committed to action but only for a short term gain.

Session 3: How can we stimulate progress towards scaling up psychosocial interventions and breaking the deadlock in climate change communication?

Participants were then invited to participate in conversations in small groups focusing on the following questions:

1) How/where can we secure funding for psychosocial interventions?

2) How can we engage more with policy-makers (making them more aware of the thinking behind psychosocial approaches and encourage them to be bolder in their own decision making?)

3) How to partner up with other organisations (e.g. from the third sector) to recruit more participants in psychosocial interventions, or set up projects based on psycho-social approaches.

4) How to engage people from the media on breaking the deadlock?

Session 4: Way forward/Next steps with suggestions of actions based on the questions above

How can we engage more with policy-makers (making them more aware of the thinking behind psychosocial approaches and encourage them to be bolder in their own decision making?) During the discussion, participants were invited to comment on suggestions and discuss if they would be interested in taking forward a particular action.

How one could study/interpret the impact of policy on a psychological level as well as emissions? e.g. going beneath the polls to show what people are really thinking. Furthermore this could also include how people perceive policy initiatives, such as individuals' motives for taking up the Green Deal.

Gill Westcott – Already involved in a different perception of national policies amongst local authority actors therefore be happy to share that.

Comment:

Understanding process through which research enters the space of policy making?

Possible action:

Workshops to better understand how research enters into evidence based policy making, which should be aimed at providing benefits to both parties.

Comment:

Should think seriously about engaging with policy makers that are not just evidence-based.

- The current government is trying to turn the idea of being evidence based as being a ban on taking up a precautionary stance on anything. In other words before one can have any doubts on something, one must have evidence that it actually causes harm.
- Evidence based is seen as entirely positive, but our attitude should be looking at evidence base as one particular thing that needs a critique. Political precautionary processes can be done by techniques that are not evidenced based.
- Should engage more with policy makers, liberate them from the obsession of being evidence based, psycho social can help with this with producing value frames.

Renee Lertzman:

Shifting the fixation is actually a major challenge; Renee would be interested in thinking through this with others. Such as looking at what research looks like that does not conform to the standard evidence based methodology.

Perhaps certain people are using a lack of evidence as an excuse not to do something, unfortunately if scientists are offered the chance to provide greater certainty, they would be happy to conduct further research when they really need to say they are confident in their findings and that the policy makers should make their decisions. It's the difference between positive and normative issues.

How to partner up with other organisations (e.g. from the third sector) to recruit more participants in psychosocial interventions, or set up projects based on psycho-social approaches

Jamie Clarke – from COIN

Currently starting a project linking climate change to the recent (2014) flooding experiences and would like to get as much evidence based information from other facilitators as well.

How to engage people from the media on breaking the deadlock?

Idea:

Discussions with media who persistently report about low carbon futures, how do they do it in the face of extreme opposition? And then share those insights with journalists who do not do that.

– BBC OU Environmental Seminars are related, but on a smaller scale.

Idea – Tweeting and supporting:

We should help each other out. Climate deniers support each other well via social media, perhaps we should start doing that and supporting each other and get into doing that systematically.

Idea – Charm offensive:

Important to spend time getting to know members of the media, once one has a contact it is easier to place stories with them Tony mentioned he would contact his local press. It was also mentioned that researchers should also take a note of what the media want to hear from researchers – it needs to go both ways.

Idea:

Organise workshops that support conversations with journalists to provide tactical training to them.

Idea:

There is already research that looks at debunking balance in research in the BBC. Suggest different dichotomies of climate change – e.g. Can the market respond adequately to climate change?

Idea:

The Science Media Centre is an organisation that puts the media in contact with experts to comment on news stories. It's a neutral organisation. Perhaps an action should be to get people involved in psychosocial research on the list of experts at the SMC.

How/where can we secure funding for psychosocial interventions?

- Who are we? Who is we? What occurs to me who we might be is an embryonic community, academic, 3rd sector community orgs, some universities. Perhaps we should think about forms of funding that could enable this community to continue to develop, work more collaboratively around research and intervention consultancy.

Sophy mentioned there is a transition research network that discusses good practices regarding transitions and researchers. Suggests looking at the Transitions Network website.

There was broad support of participants being involved: Surefoot Effect, COIN, Meshell Pitworth, Queen Margret University.

Conclusion – Paul Hoggett briefly summarises the outcomes of the day in conversation with Karen Henwood, Renee Lertzman, Tony Wragg and others.

Paul Hoggett

What is psychosocial research?

It focuses on:

1) feelings and defences against feelings in the context of climate change

2) framings, narratives and discourses – the structures through which we generate meaning in society

3) understands a human subject as someone riddled by conflicts, contradictions and dilemmas

4) the role of group identity as absolutely paramount in the formation of human experience. Within this people also create 'we' and 'they' group identities.

There is a need to understand all human experience in its great depth in relation to climate change.

......Is this who we are?

Renee Lertzman:

- When one starts talking about how we think about framing and narrative, a lot of social sciences do that as well, but not from a psycho social orientation.

- Unaware if psycho-analytic/clinical psycho-analytic has been utilised that has a very good experience of engaging with conflicts. Is there a reluctance to utilise this? There is a bit of a tension in how one thinks about this. Everyone wants to encompass as much as possible however to be effective one actually has to be quite concise.

Response from Karen Henwood:

- There have been lots of questions about which stories to ask.

- Stories need to be created that articulate psychosocial aspects (lived experiences/affects), go deeper into people's everyday concerns, and ask questions

about how to think about a better future. We need to generate intellectual and practical endeavours to invest in. This has to be heard from academics and NGOs.

- Karen was on erring on the side of caution on the academic side against underestimating the challenge of increasing the presence of psycho social research.

- There are problems of timing and temporal pressures – one is often able to point the finger at policy makers and their short term-ism. However if one is talking about emotions and feelings, relationship building is very important.

- There are problems of evidence base, we live in an auditing society. This event created a space for putting it at a distance and engaging with it at the same time.

- One does need to be able to talk about evidence/arguments/epistemology. Therefore the evidence base capturing does need to happen in order to be taken seriously.

Renee suggest that perhaps everyone could think about taking themselves out of their comfort zones from a strategic point of view about communication to challenge epistemic attachments if we are really thinking about mixing things up.

Tony Wragg:
- Perhaps listening and hearing as well as telling should be a methodology to utilise, as it is through stories that one can get to the content and emotion that is brought into the consciousness.

- Once people start talking about their feelings, one can then manage them and regulate them.

- There is a collective unwillingness for anyone to put themselves forward to be a potential target.

Comments:

- If lots of people stand up it is harder for just one individual to be a target.

- There have been lots of references to negatives and people's fear. Being positive is important as well. Everyone should remember that there is plenty to talk about in joyful and happy experiences of change, e.g. how wonderful the world could be.

- The whole issue of human experience has now kind of disappeared from social work practice.

- One of the latest reviews of social workers mentioned 'it was about time we bought case notes back in to social work, to be more experience centred and less evidence centred'. A psychosocial approach is about experienced based practices. Collectively one is trying to understand the complexities of human experiences.

Renee Lertzman:

There is still some resistance to the 'myth' of apathy as some believe that it cannot be proven. Unfortunately it is challenging to empirically test this area of research. However this

can all be proven and that more investment in research methodologies is needed to refine

methodological expertise.

Perhaps narrative research focusing on stories needs to be contextualised in a way that is

more acceptable for those that find this type of research as too 'soft'.

Comment:

The participants of this event did not just come due to self-interest but because they feel

individually that they have a social responsibility to make the world a better place. It is

uplifting to know there are others out there, and the interconnected world, which was

highlighted by Renee joining the event via Skype, enables us to do that.