

The Guardian



How framing can move climate change from scientific to social fact

Most of us simply don't see ourselves in the melting ice, and the hockey-stick graphs - we need a way of thinking and speaking about the changing climate

Jonathan Rowson and Adam Corner

Fri 23 May 2014 12.15 EDT

Climate change is a scientific fact, and increasingly a lived human experience. But it is not yet what sociologists call "a social fact". It's not an integral part of the way we shape our social practices, nor a significant enough cultural norm to act as a constraint on our behaviour.

The signifiers of climate change are part of the problem; we are supposed to see ourselves in the melting ice, the plaintive polar bears and the hockey-stick graphs, but most of us simply don't. There has been a fundamental failure in the way in which the idea of climate change has been communicated, based on a misunderstanding both of human nature and the systemic nature of the challenge.

What climate change means - and by extension how we should collectively mobilise a meaningful response to it - remains stubbornly stuck, like a broken record, on a problematic vision of 'The

Science' translating into a comically generic injunction for Action, with most of the difficult ethical, cultural, political and economic questions left implicit, for policymakers to work out, as if they were equipped for such a task.

As argued in a recent Royal Society of Arts (RSA) report a major cause and consequence of this inertia is that even those who broadly accept the facts of climate change struggle to see themselves either as part of the problem or the solution. No wonder then that our societal response has been lacking precisely those personal qualities - passion, honesty, tenacity, and vision - that the issue demands of us.

"Framing" is rapidly becoming a buzzword in debates about climate change, and will not by itself keep fossil fuels in the ground. But we do need a way of thinking and speaking that captures the fact that climate change is not merely one of many environmental problems, but a completely unique collective action problem, and one that is implicated in every aspect of our lives.

As previously argued by Jonathan Rowson we need a framing that is complex enough to highlight the competing commitments (eg to energy security, fuel prices, and economic growth) that militate against many forms of action, but also one that's simple enough to be a shared reference point. A systematic unpacking of the relationship between these Seven Dimensions of climate change: science, technology, law, economy, democracy, culture, behaviour, is our attempt to satisfy both these constraints.

A major new collaboration by the RSA and the Climate Outreach & Information Network (COIN), funded by the Climate Change Collaboration, will catalyse a series of conversations about how we might use this framing to help develop, in effect, a social identity for climate change. The aim is to begin weaving a network of representatives from across these diverse backgrounds and convene a series of seven public events at the RSA exploring the interaction between them, leading to a final report in 2015.

We can't capture the full range of potential interactions in this post, but here are a few pointers on what might we expect from such discussions:

Every dimension has a strong claim to fundamentality - and they are all right

So much of our legitimate fear stems from the models, measurements, probabilities and predictions of climate science as our most objective reference point and shared touchstone. But so much of our hope rests in the applied sciences of technology to, for instance, make renewable energy at scale feasible, affordable and swift. Even the most hardened techno-optimist will recognise that we also need law, to give us regulations without which we can't get national and international incentives for technological development or constraints on fossil fuel production at sufficient scale and speed.

There are limits to such constraints though, because the consumption-based growth imperative that shapes the global economy is not going anywhere fast, and there is no long term solution that doesn't factor in a new economic vision. There is little hope of that kind of transformative change happening unless we can mobilise and channel civic and political will in ways that allow us to take sound collective decisions, which means democracy has to deliver.

But where will such will and conviction come from if not from media, social media, art, music; the ideas, ideals and visions of culture? And who is going to really 'act' to make all this happen if not people in all these dimensions of their own lives, through changes in their behaviour?

The framing helps broker 'technical solutions' and 'adaptive challenges'

Essential but neglected discussions between these two distinct families of approaches can be tackled through framing. By capturing the need both for technical solutions relating to levers that can be pulled within our current system or paradigm (science, technology, law) and adaptive challenges (behaviour, culture, democracy) relating to personal, political and social progress that could potentially yield a more fundamental transformation. Changes in the economy typically feature both technical solutions (eg carbon taxes) and adaptive challenges (eg shorter working weeks) and might be seen as a bridge between the two.

Every dimension needs something from the others

The framing has a holographic quality, in that if you look through a particular lens you begin to see the other dimensions there too.

Consider Shell's recent statement (technology) that their business model (economy) relying on fossil fuel extraction remains safe from "the carbon bubble"; a scenario in which current balance sheet assets lose their massive value and become "stranded" as governments respond to explanations and predictions on devastating climatic changes (science) by legislating (law) against the extraction of fossil fuels due to political pressure (democracy). Shell justified themselves on the basis that energy demand is going to keep rising (behaviour) and implicitly on fossil fuels not becoming stigmatised due to the growth of divestment strategies (culture).

Viewed in this way, investors with an interest in renewable energy technologies would be well advised to get talking to very different kinds of "tribe", including student divestment movements, and this is just one of many examples.

There is something in the seven dimensions for anyone to get their teeth into - this is a way of beginning to think about climate change that invites widespread debate and contestation, not the uniform agreement of a niche minority, which keeps us exactly where we are.

The sustainable living hub is funded by Unilever. All content is editorially independent except for pieces labelled advertisement feature. Find out more here.

Join the community of sustainability professionals and experts. Become a GSB member to get more stories like this direct to your inbox

Since you're here ...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

I appreciate there not being a paywall: it is more democratic for the media to be available for all and not a commodity to be purchased by a few. I'm happy to make a contribution so others with less means still have access to information. Thomasine, Sweden

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps fund it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as \$1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Behaviour
- sustainable living
- Climate change (Environment)
- Climate change (Science)