




IT'S TIME FOR A FOCUSED CLIMATE CHANGE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY: "IT'S ABOUT HEALTH, STUPID."

Aug 8, 2018 | Climate Change News, Feature



Authors: Ed Maibach, MPH, PhD and John Kotcher, MS, PhD, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

As communities around the world step up with actions to limit global warming and accelerate the global transition to clean energy, questions abound about how to build public and political support for a 21st Century clean energy economy and other climate solutions. Many members of the public and policy makers—perhaps especially [Americans](#)—erroneously think of climate change as an environmental problem whose effects are largely distant from us—in time (i.e., not yet), in space (i.e., not here), and in species (i.e., not us). In reality, human-caused climate change is causing harm now (i.e., today), here (i.e., in communities across the U.S. and worldwide), to us (i.e., to people as well as to plants, penguins and polar bears).

Although the public is not well versed in any of the vexing ways that  English harming us and our world—including [making our weather more dangerous, threatening our food and fresh water supplies, and damaging our infrastructure and coastal communities](#)—we contend that the most important public education opportunities may be found in communicating the myriad ways that [climate change is harming our health](#), and the truly profound [health benefits associated with clean energy](#). Similarly, we contend that educating the public and policy makers about the many vexing harms associated with air pollution—which like climate change is caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels—creates important opportunities to build public and political will for public health and climate solutions.

As communication scientists, we study—among other things—how to mount science-based public communication campaigns for the benefit of the public's health and wellbeing. In a series of studies conducted over the past several years, we have sought to understand how Americans respond to information about the health effects of climate change and air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels. What we learned is that informing people about these health harms associated with burning fossil fuels—and about the health benefits associated with clean energy—is a compelling and effective way to engage Americans across the political spectrum and increase support for clean energy and other climate solutions.

Our initial [research](#) revealed that most Americans are unable to name a single way that climate change harms our health, or to identify which groups of people are most vulnerable. In subsequent research, when we provided people with [information about eight specific categories of health impacts of climate change](#), it increased their cognitive and affective engagement with the issue, including the perception that climate change is bad for human health and that they personally would be harmed by climate change. Some of these effects were still present two to three weeks later when we surveyed them again. What's more, these changes in opinion were largest among political moderates and those who lean conservative—effectively reducing polarization between liberals and conservatives. We think that's important because reduced issue polarization can help encourage thoughtful policy-focused dialogue across the political aisle, and thus help government officials make better decisions. We also found variation in how people evaluate different health impacts from climate change. Information about illnesses from contaminated food, water, and disease-carrying organisms was seen as both new and worrisome. Conversely, information about impacts on mental health was seen as new, but was also seen as difficult to understand, temporally distant, and lacking in personal relevance. This information is important because it can be used to guide educational efforts.

Doctors have long known that air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels contributes to serious health problems like asthma, heart disease and cancer in millions of Americans—and billions of people worldwide. Over the past decades, doctors have also learned that



air pollution is also [seriously harming our brains and our mental abilities](#) English among our children (including babies before birth), our elderly, and people living in poverty. For children, these harms include delays in development, reduced IQ, attention deficits, learning difficulties, behavioral problems, and autism, even when the exposure occurs before birth. In older adults, exposure to air pollution can contribute to dementia and possibly Alzheimer's Disease. People living in poverty are often most exposed to air pollution, because of where they work and live.



In our most recent set of studies—conducted in partnership with Healthy Babies Bright Futures—we found that providing this information creates another useful way of heightening people's appreciation for the benefits of clean energy. Specifically, to determine which of these health harms were most concerning to people, we surveyed a large, nationally-representative group of American adults and asked them to rank a set of 10 different statements about the health effects of air pollution from fossil fuels. We found that the harms to older adults' brains as well as the more well-established harms associated with asthma, heart disease and cancer were of concern, but our participants were most concerned about the potential harm to children's brains. This was true even among older participants and those living in low-income households. Moreover, we found that after reading these 10 messages, Democrats, Independents, and Republicans alike developed a greater sense that fossil fuels are harmful to our health, and they became more supportive of the United States using less fossil fuels and more clean energy.

Our research findings are not unique; [other teams of researchers](#) are reaching [similar conclusions](#). In total, these studies provide strong evidence of the value of communicating about the health effects associated with burning fossil fuels. Efforts to communicate about the harms of air pollution to heart and lung disease and cancer are reasonably well-established— thanks to the efforts of the American Lung Association and others—and should be continued. Efforts to communicate about the health threats associated with climate change are newly emerging—thanks to the efforts of the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health and other organizations—and should be quickly ramped up. Efforts should now be organized to communicate about the harmful effects of burning fossil fuels on our brains, particularly the neuro-developmental impacts on babies (born and not yet born) and children, the neuro-degenerative impacts on older adults, and the injustice inherent in the fact that our nation's—and the world's—poorest people are most likely to be harmed.

Health professionals and health organizations are the ideal messengers to be leading these public engagement efforts, because doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other professionals are among the most trusted members of every community. Health messages about air pollution, climate change and fossil fuels—delivered repeatedly in clear terms by a variety of trusted health professionals—have great potential to help the public and policy makers understand what's really at stake. They also have the potential to involve important new stakeholders and other trusted voices—like groups concerned

about the wellbeing of babies before birth—who have not traditional the campaign to clean our air, water and energy supplies. This public engagement strategy offers the very real possibility of breaking through the political deadlock for the benefit everyone's health.

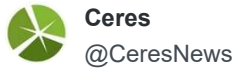
English

Ed Maibach is a University Professor and Director of George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication; he defines himself as a public health professional first, foremost, and always. John Kotcher is an Assistant Research Professor in Mason's Center for Climate Change Communication; he studies how civic organizations can most effectively recruit, organize, and mobilize citizens to demand action on climate change.

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

Tweets by @GCAS2018

Global Climate Action Summit Retweeted



The Global Climate Action Summit is right around the corner, but there's still time for investors to take action [#climatechange](#) and participate in [#TheInvestorAgenda](#)! Ceres is showcasing investor leadership at [@GCAS2018](#). Visit: theinvestoragenda.org to join us! [#StepUp2018](#)



[Embed](#)

[View on Twitter](#)



@2018 Global Climate Action Summit | [Privacy Policy](#)