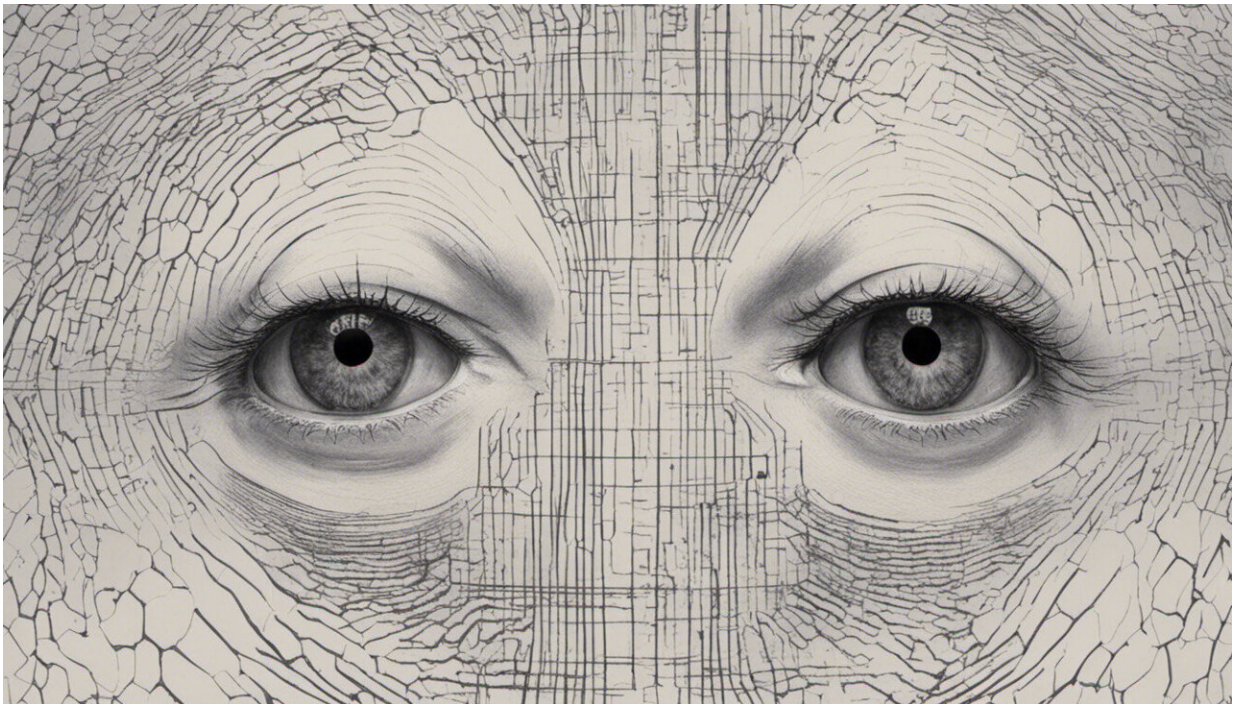


New international climate chief faces a serious communication challenge

October 13 2015, by James Painter



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's all change at the most important climate science body in the world, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). [Hoesung Lee of South Korea](#) was named the new chair – and it's fair to say he is much less well-known than his European and American rivals.

Raising his profile will be one challenge, but much more important will be improving the way the IPCC communicates with its many audiences. Lee has promised to do exactly that, but so far he has been short on specifics and new ideas.

He will have to get up to speed quickly as the [crucial Paris summit](#) is almost upon us. In the run-up to the last (potentially) breakthrough UN summit in Copenhagen in 2009, the IPCC was very slow to rebut the challenges to mainstream science launched by sceptics.

As the president of the Copenhagen meeting, Connie Hedegaard, was quoted as saying: "Millions were put into international campaigns, yet when [Climategate](#) emerged the IPCC had almost no one employed to take care of communications. They did not even have a communications team."

The IPCC has come a long way since its inept handling of the Climategate and [Himalayagate](#) controversies. For a start, it now has professional communications staff, but it has an equally long way to travel.

Academics and others have identified some of the obstacles to more effective IPCC communication – [a lack of resources](#), [over-reliance on technical language](#), and [failure to take advantage of new media](#) have all been identified.

To his credit, Lee did mention in his first press conference as chair one area of communication he wants to develop: he will increase the amount of outreach work directed at a wider audience around the world. This is one of the recommendations coming out of a recent survey of users of the IPCC's blockbuster volumes known as the assessment reports, which the IPCC publishes every five or six years.

In this survey (to be published soon as part of a [research project](#) analysing how the IPCC reports inform policy making) my colleagues and I interviewed 30 representatives of the groups identified by an independent review of the IPCC as their target audiences – policy makers, the business sector, NGOs, higher education and the media. We wanted to know their views on the usefulness of the IPCC reports, their language and clarity, and recommendations for the future.

Bad communication

One of the recommendations is that one highly effective way of communicating the science is when IPCC authors talk directly to local, regional or sector-specific users, particularly when they combine their own expertise and scientific rigour to communicate the findings clearly. But another clear message from the research is that although the IPCC reports sets the standard for high-quality science, overall they still suffer from low-quality communication.

Part of the problem is that the often impenetrable or jargon-ridden language used by the scientists may be fine for other scientists in their peer group but not for policy makers and other non-expert groups. Many of the interviewees recommended bringing in specialist writers (who are familiar with the science) early in the writing process.

Inadequate staffing

Another issue is the appropriate level of resources for communication. The IPCC rightly parades the large numbers of scientists (running into the thousands) who write and review its reports.

But it is not as widely known that the communications team consists of just one head, former Reuters journalist [Jonathan Lynn](#), backed up by

one or two colleagues.

It may not be the best use of IPCC funds to substantially increase its permanent media staff as demands on them peak mostly at the time of publications. However, a strong case can be made for increasing selected funding in the following areas: outreach work, building an online and social media strategy, graphics development, learning good practice from other reports and developing better metrics for assessing how widely the IPCC reports are used.

Tailored reports

Lee wants more input from the finance and business sectors into the IPCC reports. He's right, but how should he do it?

Again, our survey recommends that [policy makers](#) and businesses should have more input into the early stages of scoping the reports to help ensure that policy concerns are flagged more clearly in the final reports.

More so-called "derivative products" would also be very helpful. These are reports aimed at specific audiences that take parts of the IPCC reports and communicate them in formats that work for those audiences. Those produced by the [Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership](#) are a good example.

The challenge is to adapt the IPCC process to allow more deployment of IPCC authors to work with these types of reports, perhaps instead of devoting so much effort to the mammoth assessment reports. The IPCC could provide some accreditation and recognition to authors and universities for participating in this manner.

A huge body of climate science is now agreed upon by the large majority of scientists. Of course, the most important knowledge gaps need to be

identified and reduced – but just as much intellectual energy needs to be directed at the thorny challenge of how best to communicate the science, particularly in a digital world.

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Citation: New international climate chief faces a serious communication challenge (2015, October 13) retrieved 12 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-10-international-climate-chief.html>

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