

Climate researchers must provide better visual communication on climate change

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Climate researchers should give more consideration to ways in which they can make the message about climate change clear to the public at large. This is argued by Professor of Communication and Cognition Fons Maes in a publication in *Nature*. Although enormous amounts of visual and digital information on climate change is available, hardly any attention is given to reaching one large and vulnerable target group: people with low levels of literacy.

According to Maes, information on [climate](#) change in reports and campaigns is difficult to access and is much too complicated. Climate scientists could meet more [communication](#) objectives if they identify with the audience that they want to reach. They could follow the example of health communication: many journals pay attention to health communication research that is also aimed at people with low literacy levels. In Maes' opinion, it is 'remarkable and unacceptable' that this subject apparently has no priority in climate science.

Symbols can be interpreted differently

Maes does not only address his message to climate scientists, but also to cognition and communication scientists. Furthermore, he disputes the idea that communication aimed at people with literacy problems can simply be solved by using visual communication. Visual codes require a certain literacy and training as well because, like language, they are also based on conventions, culture, and locality. For instance, symbols like

thought or speech balloons, prohibition crosses, action lines, and emotion symbols such as hearts for love, can be interpreted differently.

A better understanding of climate change should be a basic right, Maes says, since it is a precondition for people to form an opinion, based on which they can take action. 'We should identify basic knowledge on climate change and make it accessible by means of various disciplines to a wide audience, including people with low [literacy](#) levels, who often run a greater risk of being impacted by climate change.'

Professor Fons Maes is head of the Department of Communication and Information Sciences of the Tilburg School of Social & Behavioral Sciences. His research interests include the interaction of visual and verbal systems in human communication, such as visual communication for information purposes. The Nature-branded journals are mainly aimed at the natural sciences. The group rarely publishes contributions by cognitive or communication scientists.

Provided by Tilburg University

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