Changing minds: How do you communicate with climate change skeptics?

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UNLV researcher Emma Frances Bloomfield has developed three categories that capture a range of beliefs that people hold about climate change and the environment. She says that knowing the "why" behind climate change denial can help people communicate more effectively with those who question the science behind it. Credit: Aaron Mayes/UNLV Creative Services

Warming oceans. Shrinking ice sheets. Intense rainfall events. Rising sea levels.

These indicators provide compelling scientific evidence that climate change is happening. But for some, skepticism has crept in, and science doesn't hold the same authority as it once did.

Emma Frances Bloomfield, an assistant professor of communication studies at UNLV, wants to know why.

"There have been many attempts by scholars to categorize climate skeptics," Bloomfield said. "A lot of people turn to a strength of denial scale, from 'I sort of deny it,' to 'I really, adamantly deny it.' Whether they're very skeptical or not very skeptical, I'm more interested in why. What is driving that skepticism at whatever level it might be?"

Some agree—and are alarmed—with the studies, assessments, and reports establishing a link between human activity and climate-warming trends. Others, however, are completely dismissive.

Knowing the "why" behind the denial can help those who are concerned about climate change communicate more effectively with those who question the science behind it. More conversations can lead to more activism and a grassroots change that develops into a larger political consciousness, Bloomfield said.

"It's not necessarily about an individual water bottle," Bloomfield said. "It's about developing environmental consciousness and raising awareness among individuals, friends, and families."

Bloomfield, therefore, has established her own scale of sorts—three categories that capture a range of beliefs that people hold about climate change and the environment. Her research, which was published recently

in the book, "Communication Strategies for Engaging Climate Skeptics," focused on religious individuals, and the relationship they see with their environment.

We caught up with Bloomfield to learn about these three categories, and how her research can help people better tailor their communication strategies when engaging on issues of the environment and climate change.

What are the three categories of climate change denial that you created?

The first category we look at are the harmonizers. Harmonizers are a group that we would consider to be environmentalists. They believe that climate change is happening, they think it's important, and they marry their environmental beliefs with their faith and their faith tenets.

The other two categories are the separators and the bargainers, and they fall into the skeptical category. They don't believe in climate change for very different reasons, and they communicate that relationship very differently.

The separators see religion and the environment as oppositional, as enemies. To the separator, if you are an environmentalist, you can't be a good Christian. So they create this divide, this separation, between the two ideas.

Bargainers are also very strong, adamant deniers of climate change, but they see religion and the environment as more of a negotiated relationship. They take some bits of science and marry it with their faith, but then they ignore the parts of science that don't support their viewpoint. They would likely say that rising carbon dioxide levels are

really great because that helps plant life grow. It's true—carbon dioxide does improve plant life—but only to a certain level, which we've far exceeded.

What's really undergirding the three categories is how they're interpreting their faith differently.

What are some strategies to engage with climate change skeptics? How do the tactics differ between the groups?

My first strategy for the separators is to ask questions. Have them lead the conversation because they'll often take you with them to the root of their skepticism. A question such as, "Where in the Bible do you turn to for guidance about the environment," might lead to the answer, "I believe that God has complete control over the Earth." The point is not necessarily to be overtly persuasive. But with your questions, you can bring them towards thinking about different opportunities or perspectives.

For the bargainers, my primary strategy is to isolate concrete examples of why environmentalism is good, based on what their frame of reference is. Work with what they already believe in, and try to find specific examples of where environmentalism fits in that frame. One bargainer, for example, was very concerned about cap and trade, and how environmental policies would affect his business. I offered examples of small businesses that had gone greener and shared studies showing how those businesses were more profitable in the long-term.

You can also trade resources with your communication partner. I had a conversation with one bargainer, and every time we spoke, we got into the habit of trading resources. They might send me a critique of a

scientific article, and in turn, I would send them a news article. It's very important for people to get out of echo chambers and read multiple news sources.

Don't start the conversation from a point of contention, Bloomfield says.

You don't want to view your dialogue partner as inferior. I think it's a problem when environmentalists or climate scientists are dismissive, or potentially patronizing to climate skeptics. I think that kind of dialogue can lead to climate skeptics feeling isolated and silenced. You may not agree with the skeptic, but you should still respect the person who holds the beliefs. We must listen, not just for a talking point to jump in on, but to understand the perspective they're coming from, and what values or identities they feel are threatened by environmentalism.

You're not likely to have conversations with pure strangers about climate change, so you probably already know a lot about the person that you're engaging with. Draw on those previous experiences—what do you already know about this person, what are their values? Go into the conversation with a knowledge-gaining mindset, rather than a persuasive goal.

It's good to talk about climate change online and on social media—it might be even better than interpersonal communication.

If you want to engage with people through social media, it's important to set the rules for engagement. If you are prompting the conversation, set the parameters or boundaries for how you will engage them. There are many people who try to bait others, but don't take the bait. Withdraw yourself from the conversation instead.

Karin Kirk is a science journalist who does this really well on her blog. She opens questions to people and genuinely responds to them. If someone posts a modified chart that says global warming isn't happening, she'll walk them through the science behind why that chart is incorrect. Unfortunately, it can be a lot of work. But if you have these conversations on social media, instead of one-on-one, you're not only talking to one person—you're talking to everyone else who might be reading the conversation. In this way, you can have a much wider reach.

If you have conversations online, you also have time to craft your response with much more time to think about it and edit it; you don't need to respond immediately.

Strident climate deniers are likely not going to change their mind, so sharing information and news articles online will just bounce off of them. But sharing information about climate change with online and social media communities is an opportunity to communicate with those who are in the middle.

Why did you focus your research on the intersection of religion and the environment?

I've always been interested in the relationship between religion and science, because many scholars and many people think of them as diametrically opposed: You are either a scientist or you are religious. In a majority of my research I explore that tension: how people combine them, how people separate them, how they negotiate them.

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