

# Improving climate change communication

June 9 2015

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A new report from The University of Nottingham looks at whether climate scientists threaten their own scientific credibility when trying to make their research accessible to members of the public.

In the last 25 years scientists have become increasingly certain that humans are responsible for changes to the climate. However, for many politicians and members of the public, climate change is still not a particularly pressing concern.

In a new report - 'Tension between scientific certainty and meaning complicates communication of IPCC reports' published on *Nature Climate Change's* website, Dr Gregory Hollin and Dr Warren Pearce from the University's School of Sociology and Social Policy, look at a press conference held by the IPCC in 2013 in order to better understand the ways in which climate scientists attempt to engage the public through the media.

## Public credibility

Dr Pearce says: "Climate science draws on evidence over hundreds of years, way outside of our everyday experience. During the press conference, scientists attempted to supplement this rather abstract knowledge by emphasising a short-term example: that the decade from 2001 onwards was the warmest that had ever been seen. On the surface, this appeared a reasonable communications strategy.

"Unfortunately, a switch to shorter periods of time made it harder to dismiss media questions about short-term uncertainties in climate science, such as the so-called 'pause' in the rate of increase in global mean surface temperature since the late 1990s. The fact that scientists go on to dismiss the journalists' concerns about the pause – when they themselves drew upon a similar short-term example – made their position inconsistent and led to confusion within the press conference."

## Accepting tensions

Dr Hollin says: "Climate change communication is anything but straightforward. When trying to engage the public about [climate science](#), communicators need to be aware that there is a tension between expressing scientific certainty and making climate change meaningful. Acknowledging this tension should help to avoid in the future the kind of confusion caused at the press conference."

## Beyond certainty

Climate change is an area where consistent attempts are made to communicate the certainty of the science. As a result, a spotlight on scientific uncertainties may be seen as unwelcome. However, Dr Hollin and Dr Pearce argue that a discussion of uncertainty may be an

unavoidable by-product of attempts to make climate change meaningful.

Dr Pearce adds: "In the run-up to the United Nations climate summit in Paris, making climate change meaningful remains a key challenge. Our analysis of the press conference demonstrates that this cannot be achieved by relying on scientific certainty alone. A broader, more inclusive [public](#) dialogue will include crucial scientific details that we are far less certain about. These need to be embraced and acknowledged in order to make [climate change](#) meaningful."

There is a [blog post](#) by the authors explaining the article on The University of Nottingham's Making Science Public blog.

**More information:** "Tension between scientific certainty and meaning complicates communication of IPCC reports." *Nature Climate Change* (2015) [DOI: 10.1038/nclimate2672](https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2672)

Provided by University of Nottingham

Citation: Improving climate change communication (2015, June 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from [https://phys.org/news/2015-06-climate\\_1.html](https://phys.org/news/2015-06-climate_1.html)

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