

To get conservative climate contrarians to really listen, try speaking their language

15 May 2018, by Jamie Freestone



People will listen more when they like what they're hearing. Credit: Shutterstock.com

It's a well-studied fact that facts don't speak for themselves. This is especially apparent with climate change. Some brilliant studies in the past ten years have shown that people respond to [narratives about climate change](#), not raw facts.

We also know that politics, not scientific knowledge, shapes people's view of [climate change](#). Hence [deniers are generally politically conservative](#), regardless of scientific literacy. That means a climate change narrative that appeals to conservative values is a high priority.

The effects of climate change are potentially catastrophic. Currently, a minority of conservative contrarians, including politicians in several countries, have an outsized influence on our lack of action. It makes sense that a big chunk of our campaigning efforts should be targeted at them.

But how many climate change campaigns are specifically targeted at people with a conservative worldview? Given what we know from the research, the answer is roughly none.

Environmentalists, policy wonks and [Brian Cox](#) continue to preach to the choir. Yet more facts, lucidly explained, will actually make [people double down on their pre-existing positions](#).

Climate change holdouts are not necessarily ill-informed. But they naturally – like everyone else – do not welcome information that conflicts with their worldview. Conservatives are likely to disregard or filter out information that threatens economic growth, standards of living, and business interests.

They're also likely to be unmoved by messages that emphasise the impact of climate change on the world's poor. Especially ineffective are morally tinged narratives about how climate change is humanity's fault and that we're getting our comeuppance.

It doesn't matter how accurate any of these narratives are; they won't work with someone who isn't open to them. Instead, we need to tailor new climate change narratives that appeal specifically to people with a conservative worldview.

Importantly, although politically targeted, these narratives don't compromise or warp the science of climate change in any way. They simply emphasise different effects.

What might these narratives look like?

The first suggestion is that carbon dioxide emissions could be explained as a disruption to the status quo (of the climate), and thus [at odds with conservative values](#). Climate change is a radical, anarchic experiment with the world's atmosphere and vital systems.

So, rather than going on with "business as usual", the sensible thing to do is to stop conducting a foolhardy all-in bet with the world's water and air. A risk-averse, sane, conservative person should want to adopt the precautionary principle and suspend

further greenhouse emissions.

Conservatives are [more likely to respond to positive messages](#) that emphasise agency rather than doom and gloom. [Promoting geoengineering](#) or market-based solutions like a carbon tax is a good idea. Even if your own political identity is opposed to these specific solutions, it's at least worth using them to win conservatives round to the idea that climate change is real.

Third, climate change can be framed as a matter of [impurity rather than harm](#). Harm to marginalised people and the environment is how many liberal-minded people conceive of climate change. But conservatives think more in terms of purity or sanctity. No worries. The effects of climate change can be no less accurately framed as being a violation of the purity or sanctity of the planet. Instead of harm to ecosystems, it's a contamination of God's green Earth.

Finally, we come to a difficult but potentially powerful narrative. It involves turning big industries in general against parts of the energy industry in particular. The more severe effects of climate change threaten the interests of everyone, including those of most large corporations.

We need to compose a narrative about the biggest emitters among [fossil fuel companies](#) not pulling their weight, and spoiling things for other industries. It might mobilise traditionally conservative business interests to support action on climate change.

Whatever narratives we use, [we need to test them](#) to make sure that they are effective.

Selling the truth

For some, even the word "narrative" carries connotations of marketing spin, PR, propaganda, or lies. The bitter joke is that as science communicators, armed with mountains of facts, real stakes and endorsements from the best-looking celebrities, we have nonetheless failed to sell the truth.

But it's not spin if it's true. All I'm advocating is that we package the facts in a way that will appeal to an

audience that has so far remained unmoved. It's a matter of strategy.

Fossil fuel companies have savvy communications strategies and obvious material incentives to lie. They have donated millions of dollars to climate denial.

We don't have to lie about climate change. It's sadly all too real.

It's time to play smart and win by engaging conservatives. Climate change shouldn't be a political issue. But combating it has to take people's political identities into account. Ignoring this fact is almost as naïve as believing that humans are not changing the [climate](#).

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