

How *Not* to Improve Communication on Climate Change Issues

One year ago in this column (July 2011 *BAMS*, p. 923), I discussed efforts to work toward effective communication on climate change. That column summarized the results of research on “cultural cognition,” which refers to how people tend to view information in ways that align with their cultural values. That research has shown how easy it is to increase the polarization of a population with respect to a controversial issue even if you try to concentrate solely on presenting scientific facts. The column also discussed the early work of the AMS Committee to Improve Climate Change Communication (CICCC), whose charge is to provide opportunities for open and respectful dialog on the science of climate change with the goal of decreasing the divisiveness within our own community on this extremely important topic.

I think we are learning a great deal about how to help foster useful communication among those of differing views on climate change. Workshops conducted by the CICCC at the AMS annual meeting in New Orleans last January — which brought together small groups of individuals with widely differing views on the science of climate change — were excellent examples of that. Follow-up discussions with those involved in the workshops revealed that almost everyone who participated came away with a deeper appreciation for the views of the other participants, and several have indicated to that they felt this approach could lead to real progress in reducing the divisiveness and conflict we see now.

While the AMS has been actively pursuing ways to bring together our community to discuss this very complicated topic and find common ground from which to move forward, some organizations have been pursuing a different approach. They are trying to apply public pressure on those whose views are different. One organization, for example, publishes on its website a list of broadcast meteorologists who are identified as “deniers” based on views they have expressed with respect to climate change (sometimes apparently using a single ambiguous or noncommittal statement by that individual as the basis for being included in the list). One gets the sense that those pursuing this tactic expect it to force broadcasters who are currently unconvinced that humans play a significant role in our changing climate to change their mind and begin promoting action to mitigate climate change. Almost every aspect of this approach, however, flies in the face of scholarly research on how to reduce polarization on a controversial topic and bring a population toward collective support for specific actions. These are examples, quite simply, of how not to improve the discussion on climate change.

If our goal is to help society deal with climate change based on the best scientific understanding available, we need a depolarization of the dialog on climate change. We need a dialog that allows respectful discussion of the science of climate change among those who are unconvinced of the role of humans in that change as well as those who are convinced. We need to have that discussion clearly separate the science of what is happening, which we seek to understand through careful analysis of observations and through the physically realistic models that are at the core of the atmospheric and related sciences, from the policy options that address possible mitigation and adaptation, which involve value judgments and are therefore inherently political.

There is no shortage of examples of how not to communicate effectively on the topic of climate change, and we see evidence of this almost daily. I hope you will join me in trying to support

avenues for respectful and open discussion on this topic, and think about ways you promote a depolarization of the dialog, both within our small community of the atmospheric and related sciences and within the general public.

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