IDEOLOGY AND THE NARRATIVE OF CLIMATE SKEPTICISM

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To improve climate communication, it helps to recognize that at least some climate skepticism is based on a narrative that is not even fundamentally about climate to begin with.

This may seem like an age when every source of knowledge is questioned, but surveys suggest that there is no widespread questioning of science. Something about climate denial, however, continues to resonate with many people.

Scholars such as Oreskes and Conway have recounted how the challenge to climate science stemmed from efforts of political operatives (including a handful of scientists), with support from organizations advocating free market principles over government action. But neither this political challenge nor free market ideology completely explains the influence of the climate-skeptical agenda. Many Americans who express skepticism about climate change science online and in social media also reject some free market ideas.

A narrative-level examination of public commentary about climate change can provide additional insight into why climate skepticism resonates, and helps explain the limited effectiveness of improved science communication. Something powerful in the story underlying climate skepticism—something beyond political motivations—captures the hearts and minds of many members of the public.

To be clear, narrative is not everything. Among the public, one's opinion on climate change depends on factors such as personal political affiliation or the actions of lobbyists, but these factors all act in concert with a story that can capture people's imagination. We can observe this narrative's presence today.

The Power of Narrative

The science-skeptical narrative is founded on issues that are prior to the climate issue. In other words, maybe public opinion was

never about the science to begin with. Ideological division undoubtedly lies at the heart of the climate science debate. Some scholars link climate skepticism in the United States and sociopolitical conservatism—a “culture war.”¹ This can be reinforced by the “echo chamber” of isolated discourse communities. Our ongoing work on ideological narratives lends credence to this. Group discourse evolves into a specific type of narrative that can be identified as an ideology, which is a comprehensive worldview. This research suggests how the isolation and closedness of a strongly ideological narrative are soon mirrored in the group itself.

The narrative creates the group, and the group creates the narrative. A compelling narrative can attract members to a movement and provide that movement with structure and rationale, while the emerging social network further defines the group narrative—for this reason, these have been referred to as narrative-networks. The climate-skeptical narrative can help isolate the group’s members from other narratives, at the same time as an already isolated group can, through an echo chamber effect, further work the narrative to become more extreme.

An ideological narrative can saturate every issue in social life. The narrative thread easily weaves from climate skepticism to immigration to race and other issues. Climate deniers frequently invoke global conspiracy—a hoax—behind climate science in the same way they talk about conspiracies involving the liberal media, voter fraud, Common Core, viral outbreaks, and other subjects. It is a universal plot.

I propose that this universality is possible because all these issue-specific narratives share a common narrative thread: they all can be built on the same basic story, or “metanarrative.” This general storyline can be put to use to capture specific issues.²

The basic story, taken at its core, is possibly not even about climate science itself. It includes, but is not simply about, the tribalism of in-group versus out-group. While it remains to more carefully work out its narrative properties, we can sketch out a basic storyline by examining strident climate science-skeptical talk online.

The Narrative in Online Examples

Some people do not hesitate to bring a host

¹ While there is an overlap between political conservatism and climate skepticism, one should not assume equivalence; indeed, one can subscribe to climate science and a conservative outlook at the same time.

² Some explanation of terminology is warranted. A metanarrative is a general narrative scheme “which orders and explains knowledge and experience... [and] suppl[ies] the structure for individual narratives” (Stephens and McCallum 2013, p. 6). A narrative is a conceptual scheme, as is a “frame,” but it takes a specific form, involving a sequence of connected events, characters, and setting. The general theme of “global conspiracy” may be considered a frame within which to view climate science; the narrative involves the complete story of who is involved in the conspiracy and why (e.g., “Climategate”).

³ www.yahoo.com/gma/cities-states-aim-paris-accord-trumps-withdrawal-152154712--abc-news-topstories.html, accessed 3 May 2019.

of other issues into the public conversation about climate change. The patterns and themes are predictable. Take, for example, comments below an article on city and state compliance with the Paris Agreement (prior to the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement)³—here is a sample:

Must be the same “smart” Liberal Sanctuary Cities who harbor dangerous illegals.

Our mayor...supporting the climate change thingy. Of course this idiot also has Houston as a sanctuary city. I did not vote for the creep. The Mexicans and blacks did.

Mayors against guns, now we have mayors against jobs.

Partisan activists that seem bent on trashing traditional American values so that we may one day accept the “official” change to radical Marxist globalism; the destruction of the Great Republic.

Liberals are so stupid they think if a man puts on a dress it changes his chromosomes—and these morons are going to lecture others about science? LOL!

Liberal socialist illegal alien lovers. It’s happening.

Now, these snippets are too short to reveal entire narratives, but they reflect some common elements: a new (socialist) world order and illegal immigration, reflecting, in part, a concern about redistribution; a racial element (e.g., “Mexicans and blacks”); and the constant reference to “them”—the liberals, the alt-left, socialists, immigrants, etc. There is often a confluence of nonclimate-related social themes in discussions primarily about climate change.

While a proper narrative analysis requires systematic analysis of a more texts, consider these comments from discussion threads concerning climate science, taken from a conservative online forum:

Those projections are based solely on computer climate models that can be, and are being, manipulated to get the desired results.... The long-range goal of those politically

motivated junk scientists in order to keep the government grants coming from leftist politicians whose goal is to control every aspect of our lives.

The goal of all liberal programs is to produce ever-increasing numbers of poor and ignorant people dependent on government handouts.⁴

This is not the point of Climate Change. The Left is claiming it is Manmade. This is the whole point of Climate Change. Man is causing this and the only way to prevent this is tax everyone. If you own a SUV, you will be taxed. If you own this or you own that, you will be taxed. Soon you will be taxed for exhaling every day. This is the reason for the Left supporting their Climate Change Hoax.⁵

And here are some comments posted below an article on the Federal Climate Science Special Report:⁶

Every Leftist climate study proposes only one set of solutions: less individual liberty, higher taxes, “population control” of America and Europe, and more government control. What’s new?

Marxism 101: Class warfare

Race warfare

Gender warfare

Ethnic warfare

Age warfare

Enviro-warfare

Religious warfare

(fill in the blank) warfare. Balkanize, divide, destroy. Its the Marxist way.

[AGW is a SCAM!!!] It certainly is. From the same lovely people who brought us railway monopolies, fiat money, income tax, communism in Russia and China, fascism in Germany, poisoning of cancer patients and institutionalized child abuse.

⁴ www.conservativesforum.com/cgi-bin/conservatives-forum/YaBB.pl?num=1448919630, accessed 21 January 2017.

⁵ www.conservativesforum.com/cgi-bin/conservatives-forum/YaBB.pl?num=1481223690/10, accessed 24 January 2017.

⁶ www.breitbart.com/politics/2017/11/08/delingpole-the-federal-climate-science-report-is-bunk-trump-must-fire-all-the-charlatans-responsible/, accessed 28 April 2019

These comments evince “issue saturation,” where the ideological storyline expands into a systemic, universal narrative. This underlying metanarrative cuts across all issues of society, merging multiple issues (e.g., climate and gun ownership).

In working out the metanarrative, it helps to look at common plot elements. There is, first of all, the fear of intrusion and loss of control in one’s social domain, whether to government or outsiders. Coupled with that is the element of change (social, economic, etc.). And lastly, there is suspicion of the unknown, the foreign, and the new. At the same time, what used to be commonplace and familiar (e.g., white majority, carbon dioxide) is now being redefined as somehow problematic. These elements together create uncertainty about one’s place in the world. To sum it up into a concise elemental plot:

While we once felt sure of our place in the world and our future, now, we are constantly being told that our ways (and, by extension, we) are somehow in the wrong. Others are imposing their ways and values on us and taking away what little control we had over our communities and our lives. They oppose us because they are completely alien to us.

No wonder, then, that slogans about “taking back” or “making the country great again” resonate with many people and many issues. In this light, climate skepticism is associated with a basic apprehension over loss of a familiar way of life and social order during an era when the American middle-class lifestyle is under threat. The familiar can be associated with cars, industry, consumption, development—all intimately linked with a carbon-centered economy. At the same time, there are fears of big government, a social elite, or the general other intruding into one’s personal domain. This narrative is the “DNA” underlying particular ideological claims made in diverse situations.

Reconstructing such a metanarrative always introduces a subjective element. The analyst has considerable discretion in deciding what elements individual stories have in common. At the same time, the reconstructed narrative is not arbitrary. It is not surprising that it has much overlap with the “deep

story,” found recently by Arlie Hochschild’s study, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (The New Press, 2016), of the deep resentment felt in a predominantly conservative community in Louisiana.

Discussion And Conclusions

The examples cited above are not necessarily representative of most climate skeptics or even of climate skeptical comments found on conservative websites. It is also easy to see that phenomena such as self-reinforcing narrative–group dynamics, issue saturation, and tendencies toward conspiracy theory are not exclusive to the ideological right or left.

The examples do show, however, that climate skepticism adopts ideological narratives that are not primarily about the strength of science or even about climate per se. The metanarrative may be based on an apprehension over social change and foreign intrusions into the conventional social order. It is the fear of a new, uncertain age where the familiar (white majority, carbon-based lifestyle) seems to be suspect and even vilified.

So then, how might one respond to the mistrust of climate science? The conversation would need to go beyond the science and on to this mistrust and fear underneath. Efforts to better communicate climate science would be more effective in conjunction with other efforts to address nonscientific issues, as in the following ideas for moving forward:

Point 1: Climate skeptics need to be listened to, taken seriously, and respected.

Often, scientists talk in ways that alienate, rather than engage, the public. The problem is telling the public, in effect, “we talk, you listen,” without taking the recipient of the message seriously enough to engage in actual dialogue.

The perception of being dismissed leads the public too easily to the idea that there is a conspiracy “out there” to suppress the truth. Dialogue requires mutual respect. Climate scientists have to make greater efforts not to seem dismissive or overbearing. This means acknowledging that it is completely reasonable to continue wondering if factors other than greenhouse gases might

be driving climate change. This means responding, patiently, to claims made by climate skeptics—for example, explaining why the scholarly community would not be capable of conspiring around an artificial consensus in order to further careers and grant monies.

Point 2: Communities need to have ownership of change and society's responses to climate and other issues.

Some people feel climate, immigration, and other issues are bringing their lifestyles into question. The resulting perception that they are being forced to change is part of what drives the rhetoric against government intrusion. Policy advocates must resist the temptation to prescribe solutions without dialogue and discussion. When scientists (too often) assume they have the solutions to climate change, they exacerbate the public’s tendency to conflate the science with the policy. Communicators should make clear that we have not figured out how, exactly, we should address climate change. The public needs to preserve its agency: People need to be listened to and allowed to take matters into their own hands.

Point 3: Climate communication has to speak to ideologically-driven fears.

While undoubtedly some anti-immigration sentiments are driven by racism, there is an ideological perspective on immigration that is about the loss of control of one’s domain, self-respect, and security. So then, immigration rights advocates might begin championing the strengthening of local industry, tradition, and local communities. Similarly, climate mitigation advocates need to champion the same issues as they begin a dialogue around climate science. Advocates of climate action need to realize that their proposals are too easily mistaken as an injunction against people’s aspirations for personal (and societal) progress. Carbon taxes are a prime example of this, and the discourse needs to go to small, positive steps (reducing energy use, walking more) that people can identify on their own and willingly take on. Small steps, in the right direction, may be the best option for engaging

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communities, notwithstanding the urgency of the problem.

There is also the need for so-called boundary agents who bridge the communication gap between scientists and communities. How does one begin a conversation with an ideologically hostile community? Perhaps it begins with finding members of the community who are willing to talk within their communities and negotiate relationships with scientists and other outsiders. Establishing relationships is the first step in overcoming an ideological divide.

⁷ Dr. Michio Kaku at <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/23/climate-change-is-not-debateable/>, accessed 23 January 2017.

These points may seem innocuous in the face of the strident, openly divisive discourse found in the United States (and elsewhere) today. However—and this is a leap of faith—sincere efforts to open up the dialogue may begin to improve the level of discussion. This is not easy. The scientific community can very understandably conclude that, as one scientist put it, “We cannot debate them, because they have no programs, no data, no formulas. There’s nothing but ideology.”⁷ And yet, even so, the need for sincere discussion becomes all the more important. ♣♣

≡ METADATA

BAMS: What would you like readers to learn from this article?

Raul Lejano: *Climate skepticism may have its roots in a more elemental narrative about social change and fracture. Efforts at convincing people about the science of climate may have limited effect, since the more elemental narrative is not even about climate per se.*

BAMS: What got you initially interested in meteorology or the related field you are in?

RL: *I began studying narrative because of its power in influencing and controlling policy. This power is evident in the rise of climate skepticism, which has mounted a challenge to mainstream science.*

BAMS: What surprises/surprised you the most about the work you document in this article?

RL: *The commonality in plot across widely varying policy issues—climate, gun control, immigration, and others.*

BAMS: What was the biggest challenge you encountered while doing this work?

RL: *The analysis of narrative, which involves deeper reading of many texts, is particularly challenging. It sometimes requires, as in this case, constructing new methods for analyzing texts. Qualitative research can require innovation. Over the years, colleagues and I have had to develop ways to differentiate overtly ideological narratives (which are closed to public debate) from more open discourse about climate. How does the story and the language change as the conversation becomes more and more one-sided and echo chamber-like? We wanted to see if narratives about other issues, besides climate, shared a common metanarrative with it.*

BAMS: What are some paths to solving the isolation of the climate change discourse?

RL: *The problem with climate discourse is that it often just stays there—on the level of abstract discourse. On that level, people simply talk past each other and conversations are more about ideology than actual things on the ground. But when things become more real, people start talking about a shared experience and the dialogue becomes more than just diatribe. I assure you*

that, for example, the shared experience of the tragic fires in Australia will affect the dialogue between pro- and anti-climate action camps over there. Reality grounds people so that they talk on some common ground (not just playing with words).

BAMS: How does this insight inform your own risk communication initiatives?

RL: *My work emphasizes the relational perspective. For example, if environmental calamities, such as desertification in sub-Saharan Africa, is too abstract and far removed for folks in New York, have a conversation between people in both places (whether virtually or actually). Actual contact with the "other" makes everything real to us.*

BAMS: Where can we inform ourselves more about the divisive climate communication dilemma?

RL: *I am putting this analysis together with a more comprehensive look at how narrative is used in policy life. The compendium takes the form of a forthcoming book, The Power of Narrative: Climate Skepticism and the Deconstruction of Science (Oxford University Press).*

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