

COMMENTARY:

A unified narrative for climate change

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There is a significant 'action gap' between what scientists argue is necessary to prevent potentially dangerous climate change and what the government and public are doing. A coherent strategic narrative is key to making meaningful progress.

Solutions to the problem of climate change are not only readily available, but implementing them would be economically, as well as environmentally, beneficial. And yet little has happened in concrete terms. This raises important issues about how climate science is communicated and why there is not more pressure on governments from their populaces to take the necessary actions. Recently in *Nature Climate Change*, for example, Richard Black argued for a significant change in the way that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change frames its summaries for policymakers¹, while James Painter advocated a different way of framing climate risk². Although such contributions are extremely valuable, we believe that what is needed is a more fundamental shift in the way that climate change, and the strategy to tackle it, is communicated.

Specifically, we believe that a strategic narrative — a dynamic and persuasive system of stories, organically generated and encouraged between government, business and civil society — will be the most effective mechanism to motivate action by the relevant audiences. The development of a strategic narrative is a unifying concept, an umbrella under which the incredible diversity of literature and projects that aim to inspire further action on climate change can be unified, bringing them together into a cohesive, coordinated and effective message. This would also help to unify climate change strategy, which currently appears to be uncoordinated and ineffective, and allow the space for scientists to communicate the salient issues surrounding climate change and the policy mechanisms that might be brought to bear to address it. In short, we believe that a government-led, iterative process of narrative forming

should commence, incorporating as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. The outcome of this iterative process should be a short, digestible and persuasive narrative that is then naturally propagated by those stakeholders.

Action gap

Although most countries worldwide have national policy in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the vast majority of these policies are unlikely to lead to the respective international pledges being met³. In fact, the lack of a coordinated strategy means that many policy efforts are so weak that they could lead to no overall reduction in emissions compared with business as usual. This shows a substantial 'action gap' between what scientists tell the government and public is necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change, and what is currently being done.

There are two related reasons for this action gap, neither of which is scientific, technical or economic. The first is the absence of credible national-level strategy for addressing the problem. In the United Kingdom, for example, there has been a vast array of different roadmaps, targets and plans for how to tackle climate change, but there is a lack of any clear, coordinated strategy. The second reason for the action gap is the failure to explain the problem of climate change, and its solutions, in a compelling way.

Strategic narratives

Strategic narratives are the 'public face' of strategy — a story, or system of stories that explains a strategy in a persuasive way. Strategy is an organizing idea — an overarching approach to dealing with the challenges facing an individual or organization. The actions needed for the

implementation of the strategy appear as events that take place in the narrative.

Narratives can be seen as a 'lens' through which we view the world, and are arguably the most natural form of human communication⁴. A compelling story is almost always more persuasive than abstract arguments or statistics⁵. A unified, collective narrative gives meaning to events, actions and underlying truths that might otherwise seem unconnected. This gives narratives a unique capacity to persuade and thereby strengthen cooperative action^{6,7}.

Narratives are always present, but a 'strategic' narrative is one that is consciously developed to achieve certain aims^{8,9}. A narrative can be tested to ascertain whether or not it is effective by asking whether it gives meaning to an organizing idea and the actions associated with that idea. If implemented effectively, strategic narratives are an evolving and malleable means of linking policy with action, as well as communicating with the public and other stakeholders, that can generate support and buy-in¹⁰. An 'effective' strategic narrative must further be tested by asking whether it is persuasive and provides a clear and compelling explanation of the strategy, and whether all of the actors involved in the narrative feel as if they are working in the same direction towards the same collective, inspiring goals. The narrative itself can be expressed in different ways, depending on the audience and the person delivering it. In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies three devices to appeal to a speaker's audience: ethos (the credibility of the speaker), logos (appeal to logic that supports the speaker's claims) and pathos (appeal to the emotions of the audience)¹¹. An effective strategic narrative must use all three of these devices.

A strong strategic narrative can maintain or even increase domestic support for contentious policies. In wars, for example, researchers have found that government strategic narratives that articulate a mission's purpose clearly, consistently and with a clear prospect of success can increase domestic support. However, inconsistently communicated narratives, contradicted by counter-narratives that challenge the government's motives or reasoning, can erode domestic support¹². This highlights the importance of a clear and consistent communication strategy, underpinned by an effective strategic narrative.

Need for narrative on climate change

There are three key reasons why a strategic narrative is important for the climate change agenda. First, a strategic narrative is a system of stories designed to persuade and could therefore help drive behaviour change. This could be done in a way that would still allow freedom of choice and come at a relatively low financial and political cost. Second, the complexity of climate change means that it is difficult for non-experts (and even experts) to understand the nature of the problem and solutions. Narratives help us make sense of complicated and seemingly unconnected events by providing an overarching plot into which these events fit. Finally, strategic narratives are a way of communicating strategy in a persuasive way. They could therefore help legitimize and explain government strategy on climate change.

By creating a shared understanding of the past, present and future, and aligning policymakers, industry and society around a shared purpose, a strategic narrative could coordinate action among the huge and disparate number of actors in the climate change space. These actors have divergent and vested interests, and both the causes of climate change and the solutions lie in their hands. At present, we are not seeing a coordinated effort by all key, willing actors in the space to tackle climate change. By creating a stronger enabling environment for both top-down and bottom-up action, the development of an effective strategic narrative would enable climate change goals to be achieved at a much lower economic and political cost than the current approach.

A strategic narrative should help convince the public that, despite the fact that the negative effects of climate change are not yet an obvious part of people's direct experience, action is required immediately and by everyone worldwide. It would allow actors to see how their actions, even small ones such as turning

an appliance off, fit into the overarching strategy to combat climate change. One way this is currently being achieved is through emphasizing co-benefits, such as energy security and reducing energy bills.

There will be individual stories 'nested' within the bigger narrative, and these must allow people to take away parts of them and make them their own story — how does my small, localized action fit into the bigger picture¹³? An example of the success of a clearly articulated mission, which allows everyone to feel that their actions are part of the big picture, is the story of President Kennedy's visit to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 1962, when he asked a cleaner what he was doing. The reply came: "I'm helping put a man on the Moon". Here was a narrative that gave everyone in the organization, if not everyone in the country, a clear and inspiring sense of purpose.

Changing the narrative

The need for an overarching strategic narrative reflects the fact that, up until now, climate change narratives have been inconsistent and uncoordinated. Prevalent 'end of the world' narratives tend to be ineffective at generating urgency, leading instead to disengagement^{14,15}. At the other end of the behaviour-change spectrum, 'every little helps' narratives lead to a failure to see how individual actions can have an overall effect, and tend to marginalize, rather than engage, society^{16,17}. The perceived cost of the low-carbon energy transition, in addition to scepticism towards both the science behind the changes and the private sector organizations advocating them, leads to contradiction and ambivalence, stifling collective public action. It is in this situation that a unifying strategic narrative could contribute.

The creation of strategic narratives must be seen as an iterative, engaging process of dialogues, not just a single, linear process with a set of objectives and a narrative that is then broadcast to the public. The relevant stakeholders must all be engaged in crafting the story, and there should be a material outcome — an exciting, interesting one-page document that is published and that tells the narrative. This process must be one that is continuously repeated, with the narrative document regularly refreshed and updated with feedback from the previous iteration. Through engagement and the involvement of all of the key, willing stakeholders in crafting the story, the narrative truly becomes 'their' story through their negotiation of a constructive path forward¹⁸.

Opportunities ahead

Climate change is a problem unlike any that humanity has ever faced before. In the scale, complexity and all pervasiveness of the issue, not only is the challenge we face greater than any other, but solving the climate change problem presents enormous opportunities, both for the United Kingdom and internationally. The unifying concept of a strategic narrative will be essential if we are to meet this challenge and seize these opportunities.

An institutional structure that acts as a vehicle for strategic narrative development and brings together stakeholders such as the public, business, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, academics and the media must be set up. The setting up of this institutional structure, and the strategic-narrative-making process that follows, should be led strongly by the government, and would link all of the stakeholders together into a vehicle through which a strategic narrative is produced and continuously updated.

The strategic narrative must manifest itself in physical form — as a document or a website, for example — that is regularly updated in an iterative process of engagement with the relevant stakeholders, building on the experiences and feedback received in the telling of the previous versions of the narrative. The narratives emerging from this process should be retold repeatedly by messengers from as many relevant institutions as possible, all of whom will bring their own unique interpretation of the narrative.

Climate change is arguably the greatest threat ever faced by humankind, but also presents opportunities unlike any other. If we are to tackle this threat and grasp these opportunities, a new approach is urgently needed. Developed in the right way, an effective strategic narrative would provide a unifying message under which all of the other work in areas such as climate change communication, strategy, policy, framing and messaging can effectively operate. An effective strategic narrative on climate change would inspire and empower individuals, enable stronger action, explain the need for positive change, coordinate key actors and decision makers, legitimize policy and persuade the relevant audiences, leading to a narrowing action gap on climate change. As a scientific and policymaking community we must prioritize the development and implementation of a strategic narrative. □

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Correction

In the Commentary 'Science and religion in dialogue over the global commons' (*Nature Climate Change* **5**, 907–909; 2015), refs 13 and 14 were misnumbered and should have been 12 and 13. Corrected after print 24 September 2015.

Correction

In the version of the Correspondence 'Validity of county-level estimates of climate change beliefs' originally published (*Nature Clim. Change* **5**, 704; 2015), the correlation coefficient should have read +0.46 ($p < 0.05$), not +0.53 ($p < 0.01$). Further, the number of counties where estimates fall within CERA/CAFOR confidence intervals is 17, not 18. This changes the variance figures to 63 vs. 12 (not 15), which suggests that the estimates by Howe *et al.* exhibit about 78% (not 74%) less variance than the true population belief. These calculation errors were made as a consequence of a coding error. These errors have been corrected and new Supplementary Information files uploaded online 13 October 2015.