

Imperial College
London



GRANTHAM INSTITUTE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN CLIMATE CHANGE ROUNDTABLE

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**58 PRINCES GATE,
IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON**

Meeting Report

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The logo graphic for the Grantham Institute features a stylized, layered wave shape. The top layer is a light green, the middle is a medium green, and the bottom is a dark blue. The text 'Grantham Institute' is in white, bold, sans-serif font, and 'Climate Change and the Environment' is in a smaller white, sans-serif font below it.

Grantham Institute
Climate Change and the Environment

Grantham Institute Roundtable On Strategic Narratives in Climate Change
58 Princes Gate, Imperial College London
16th February 2017

Meeting Chair

Rt. Hon. Lord Deben (Committee on Climate Change)

Speakers

Stephen Heidari-Robinson (University of Oxford)

Dr. Erlend Moster Knudsen (University of Cologne & Pole-to-Paris)

Attendees

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Dr. Irene Lorenzoni (University of East Anglia)

Dr. Felicity Mellor (Imperial College London)

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Executive Summary

An expert roundtable was held at 58 Princes Gate, Imperial College London, on the afternoon (14:30 to 21:00) of 16th January. It was organised as part of a three-month project funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Accelerator Grant.

The event, chaired by the Rt. Hon. Lord Deben, was an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to come together and take a strategic look over the current state of Climate Narratives in the UK, and discuss opportunities for future collaboration and research.

Key Findings

General Findings

- There has been a great wealth of research into how to communicate climate change effectively and how audience segmentation can be best achieved.
- There are many examples of small-scale public engagement studies however there has been little testing undertaken on a broad, large scale societal and geographical scales.
- Fear of failure and a lack of political will has held back these kinds of efforts.
- Overarching narratives¹ are likely unfeasible and incongruent with our understanding of the heterogeneous systems of values and perspectives that exist within wider society. However, there is definitely scope to increase the societal scale at which strategic narratives² are developed, tested and used; up from the community scale to the scales of values groups, such as faith-based organisations. Narratives with an appeal that overlaps audiences may have the power to facilitate cooperation and provide foundations for public support for climate mitigation policies.
- Individuals and organisations need to be prepared to *make mistakes* that can be learned from as they create Strategic Narratives.
- Often advice around climate communications has suggested linking climate change to other related issues, such as health or energy security; relating disparate themes is part of the power of narratives and facilitating engagement with audiences that may otherwise be uninterested in climate change is important. However, this may become problematic when the climate narrative begins to omit climate change altogether. Pragmatic advice on how this moral quandary about avoiding 'climate by stealth' whilst maintaining engagement in communications is urgently needed.

¹ Defined here as social information pertaining to actors, characters and events, as well as the relations between them that have temporality, causality and interpretivity

² See page 6 for definition

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Specific Findings

- Narratives around the falling cost of renewables may be gaining traction. However, they are not a panacea for gaining broad-based public support for investment in renewables and should be treated with a healthy caution.
- The IPCC could reframe its work as reacting to the needs of decision makers, rather than reacting the problem of climate change itself.

Suggested Actions and Next Steps

- There is a clear appetite for additional discussions in which the implicit assumptions of communications efforts can be properly debated and challenged in an interdisciplinary setting. There is also the need to develop capacity and collaboration in the community across different disciplines.
- A forum is needed to allow communicators and narrative practitioners to discuss processes, what works, difficult communications challenges and share salient research. A future workshop, in an informal setting with small-group discussions, was suggested to be of use. However, progress in this field must proceed without periodic meet-ups being necessary and further funded research is required.
- Communicators should be aware of the need for a “Brexit-Positive” narrative around climate change.

Areas for Future Research

- Work urgently needs to be put into the development of methods for the testing of large-scale narrative development and subsequent well-strategised implementation of these and testing. A focus is needed on what metrics to use to assess the effectiveness of different narratives over different timescales.
- Research should be done into how different sectors and audiences view narratives, and the extent to which they can be determined to be effective. Again the development of the relevant metrics to allow this to happen needs to be developed and longitudinal studies undertaken to assess resonance of different narratives amongst audiences.
- What are the most effective narratives to engage with ‘*brexit-voting*’ audiences? What are the values systems of these audiences in relation to climate change?

Background to Meeting

The meeting was organised as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded Impact Accelerator Account stemming from the Masters research of Luke Bevan, supervised by Dr. Mark Workman and Thomas Colley. The meeting was sponsored by the Grantham Institute for Climate Change and the Environment at Imperial College London. The aim of the meeting was to identify gaps in our understanding and knowledge about how narratives work and to galvanise a community of narratives practitioners.

The meeting was attended by a diverse group of 30 individuals³ drawn from across academia, business and policy and was chaired by the Rt. Hon Lord Deben. It ran from 14:30 until dinner at 18:30 at 58 Princes Gate, London, SW7 2PG.

Strategic Narratives

The idea for the meeting originated from a recognition of a groundswell in climate strategic narratives research in the UK and elsewhere, and the desire to understand how this could effectively be capitalised on to aide climate communications efforts. Strategic narratives are persuasive stories that can give meaning and therefore justification for actions, strategies and policies (1,2).

Key Objectives

- Identify the appetite for the use of narratives in climate change strategy and policy amongst actors and climate communicators: how might they be best developed and by whom?
- Map the work taking place and the gaps in our current understanding of the use of strategic narratives in developing engagement on climate change; and
- Foster discussions around future collaborations for narrative development in the UK and internationally.

Central Questions

The key questions to be addressed by the meeting were broadly divided into two groups looking **at strategic narratives in practice** and the **research conducted around them**.

The sub-questions guiding discussion about **strategic narratives in practice**:

- To what extent are strategic narratives being employed at present?
- What are the dominant public narratives around climate change presently: who are using them and how?
- How are these changing?
- What are the demands on climate communicators and how are they changing?

³ See page 2 for list of attendees

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- Which audiences are / are not being mobilised effectively in the climate change discourse? Can Strategic Narratives assist in mobilising audiences who are difficult to reach?
- What do communicators need in order to communicate more effectively?

The sub-questions guiding discussion around **research into strategic narratives**:

- What is the state of play in strategic narratives research?
- What don't we know about strategic narratives?
- What can we be doing better?
- Is there a need for academics to work more closely with practitioners to develop better narratives?
- What are the practitioner needs for future research, which academics can satiate?

Central Discussions

Opening to the Meeting

Lord Deben opened the discussions by noting the difficulties in making climate change accessible without oversimplifying it. He remarked on the diversity of the opinion in the room and how refreshing it was to see that a group that may have had quite different political beliefs and opinions about communications could come together in such a setting.

Addressing the current state of play in climate narratives research, the sentiment in the room was that climate communications has reached a stage where expert communities are being effectively reached. However, it was apparent that there remain significant issues in communicating with different sectors and the general public. Attendees discussed the difficulties in producing communications that are true to the facts that one is trying to get across whilst also being sufficiently emotionally engaging.

“Science has learned to move from speaking to other scientists, to other professionals who have an interest in the matter, but not so much to the general public. Often the tendency has been to assume that you have a neutral audience in the general public, when in fact it is more complex; often the discourse has been poisoned by unhelpful views.”

One participant lamented that the focus of much communications has been on trying to make moral cases for climate change: *“It isn't about morality, it is about action. It is about making caring about climate convenient for people's day-to-day existence.”* Another agreed, claiming that empathy was also important, drawing a lesson from communications from how a comedian can interact with an audience:

“A competent comedian says what they want to say and makes the audience laugh; a good comedian says what the audience wants to hear and makes them laugh; a brilliant comedian does both at the same time.”

Mapping and Choosing Audiences

Returning to the question of audiences, it was generally agreed that there exist a number of tools to map public audiences in the United Kingdom.

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“There are lots of these identifiable segments of the public e.g. ‘waste not want not’ group of elderly citizens who respond to narratives around thrift well. The question is what you do with these groups.”

One attendee remarked, *“There exists something of a cottage industry in finding ways to engage with right-wing people in the UK. I think a lot of that has been very successful in finding that ideas around ‘balance’ are really important to these people. It’s a question of putting those ideas into practice.”* Clearly much progress has been made in this area.

There seemed to be a general uncertainty as to what to do with the granular information obtained from research. Furthermore, it was unclear which organisations have either the financial clout or authority to put these kinds of nuanced climate communications activities into action. The discussion of empathy, authority caused one participant to remark that much of discussion was essentially Aristotelian in the nature of rhetorical examination, looking at *pathos* and *ethos*. Such approaches underlie some frameworks for building strategic narratives espoused in war studies (2).

Talking about climate change and getting people excited

A lively discussion about how many climate narratives can over-emphasise the negative implications of climate change begun when one participant noted, *“All the emphasis seems to be on the negative and what is missing is the excitement about the proposed low carbon future.”* Another remarked, *“... the climate change narrative is one about the problem of climate change and the science explaining that is it happening, and not about the solutions.”*

Attendees agreed that “doom and gloom” narratives are insufficient for compelling people to action. The fact that negative or disaster narratives are insufficient to inspire action has been well established in the research community (3,4). The question remains as to where the opportunity and excitement can be generated.

One attendee brought to everyone’s attention how news organisations such as *the Guardian* are already putting the need for positive climate stories into action and have expressed a desire to talk about climate change in a positive way (See for example,5).

Citing the current populist Zeitgeist, one participant was keen to consider narratives about *taking control of the energy system* and how this could be explored as an empowering and exciting narrative. This led to a discussion about the expansion of German cooperatively owned energy companies and similar successes in Denmark. However it was noted that the UK energy system is structurally very different to that of Germany and Denmark and that these kinds of narratives could accompany radical UK energy policy reform.

The need for Visible Actions and Narratives

It was suggested that the need for people to feel empowered could be achieved through small, visible actions. An example of this is the runaway success of the recent 5p plastic bag surcharge policy (6).

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“One canvas bag can have the energy input of many plastic bags. There may be some environmental benefits of people switching to using these bags, but that may be a little aside the point. The carrier bag charge allows people to feel like they are doing something and it helps them understand climate change.”

Other examples of practical visible actions that can make climate change more tangible to individuals included recycling. However a concern was raised about the extent to which this may allow moral licencing (see for example, 7). One participant also noted that *“awareness is not a de facto route for creating engagement”* and there is reasonable evidence that these kinds of actions have little *spillover effect* into greater engagement with climate issues (8).

The topic of fossil fuel divestment was raised by one attendee as an example of an action that has little practical effect, but produces a visible outcome. However, later in the discussion other participants debated as to whether fossil fuel divestment really provided the hopeful story that we are looking for, as by its nature it focuses on a negative without a hopeful and positive prescription for action.

Price Narratives

There was notable discussion about media narratives around the reduction in price of renewable energy technologies (examples ,9,10). However, opinion was divided as to the significance of this narrative and its efficacy.

“Look, the fact of the matter is that in the UK renewables cost a bit more right now. This is obviously changing, but we have to be able to make the case for renewables outside of this narrative.”

One participant indicated that successes on price should not be ignored, saying, *“community led solar energy in Austria (11) is paying half the price and now they fund their local basketball team. That is a great community story”* or other cases such as in Texas where *“Trump voters, who may not be assumed to be in favour of climate policy, are implementing renewables when they make economic sense.”* Another participant seconded this idea, saying that in Alaska oil revenues are being reinvested in clean energy sources with no mention of climate change in the associated legislation.

It was clear from discussion that cases could be found in which narratives around the falling prices of renewable energy technologies were gaining traction. However there was general acknowledgement of the fact that this narrative is not a fix-all solution to gaining wide support for investment in renewables.

Talking to Others

Although the diversity of professional and academic backgrounds in discussions should be noted, it was remarked that most attendees could be described, and indeed self-described, as *metropolitan*. A recurrent question asked was how do we talk to “Brexit Britain”. One attendee lamented on the difficulty in finding credible voice among Brexiteers that talked about climate change. There was agreement in the room that outreach was required that burst metropolitan bubbles to think about how more parochial individuals may form a climate narrative.

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The threat to progress on climate change posed by populism was also mentioned:

“There exists a narrative about how liberal elites and environmental loonies are trying to use fear-mongering and predictions of disaster of climate to take over our existing institutions and destroy our capital economy.”

Another attendee later echoed this, *“after the Brexit vote, many economists were horrified that they had been ignored during the debate. The criticism was that they lacked empathy: the challenge is not just about convincing people, but also being better at listening.”*

Despite all the issues described above, some successes of past communications efforts were duly noted:

“Let’s look at the result of the first generation of climate change narratives: we see consistently that about 2/3 of people polled since the 90s say that they are concerned about climate change. The second stage of climate narratives has been less effective. We need to show how we are part of an unfolding narrative and give people a sense of what their future lives will be like.”

Do we talk about climate or talk about something else?

The most recurrent and thorny issue repeatedly returned to was a central dilemma that communicators face when trying to talk to diverse audiences about climate change. There remains a question as to what extent communicators side step talking directly about climate change by discussing it in terms of more relatable themes or presenting in terms of related issues.

“The longer we leave climate change out of the discussion when we talk about all these disparate issues impacted by it, the harder it will be the knit it back in when we really do need to talk about it.”

Similarly another attendee said:

“There has to be a balance. We hear a lot of “don’t mention the climate”. Obviously we need to be able to link everyday issues to climate change, but where do we draw the line?”

“This is just climate by stealth. Are we just trying to smuggle climate change in? This seems a bit like nudge⁴. If I was a bystander I would rather be persuaded. We have this feeling that we can smuggle the good stuff in behind something else. Is this the right way to go?”

This is an issue that has drawn considerable attention in academic circles, for instance the *Hyperobject* concept of Timothy Morton (12) which looks to reframe climate change as an object too great for humans to fully comprehend and instead to understand it by exploring its many manifestations in our lives. However, such ideas have been

⁴ Concept in which behaviour is changed through incremental reinforcement (See for instance ,16)

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criticised as being disempowering, inaccessible and obscure (13). The overwhelming prevalence in this issue at the roundtable shows how much pragmatic and practical guidance is needed to help communicators on the ground resolve this tricky issue.

Speaker: Stephen Heidari-Robinson

Stephen Heidari-Robinson, Energy and Environment fellow at Oxford University and former advisor on Energy and the Environment to David Cameron, gave a speech about the political realities of putting communications into practice. His speech drew on his personal experience in planning for a narrative-driven push on environmental issues in the wake of a vote for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union, which never came.

Stephen emphasised the need to look past the political values of others and take a pragmatic approach, finding successes for the environment where we can. He also stressed the need to find good news to give to audiences and showed that good news could be found in the partial decarbonisation of the British electricity grid.

His main point of emphasis was that communications campaigns must be driven by content, incorporating meaningful action, rather than just creating *awareness for awareness' sake*.

He offered three key takeaway messages from his talk:

1. We need to link the climate change agenda into other things.
2. Think about content before communication. E.g. building on successful decarbonisation. And also what we want to do e.g. drive emissions reductions worldwide. We must avoid woolly thinking when building narratives.
3. Always have clarity on **who** we are communicating with e.g. government, industry (and which industry?)

Break-Out Sessions

In addition to the key discussion that took place throughout the day, four break-out discussions were held so that discussions could launch deeper into a number of themes.

Each discussion had at its focus one of the following questions:

- What is the **narrative of the IPCC** in the global response to climate change?
- How can testing of narratives for public engagement be implemented on a large scale?
- What narratives can best engage **policymakers**?
- What are the best “green-growth” **narratives for business**?

IPCC Discussion

The discussion, comprised of 7 attendees, began by establishing a common understanding of what the IPCC is and what it does. The narrative from the IPCC reports emerges in part from the contents of the reports; a schematic outline of what the reports will cover is agreed by authors in advance with governments. The content

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of the reports then reflects the evidence reviewed by authors and reviewers of those reports.

It was noted there is a lack of public familiarity with the IPCC, very few people among publics know of the IPCC and that sometimes the IPCC message is perceived to be one of doom and gloom. However the public is not the IPCC's key audience of UNFCCC stakeholders.

The discussion considered the challenges to what the IPCC is and what its narrative *should be*. It was agreed that this implies a reform or evolution⁵ of the IPCC, although this is not likely to be forthcoming soon (the IPCC has been functioning in this format for over 20 years). However the IPCC has acknowledged the importance of improving its communications with stakeholders including publics – see communications meeting in Feb 2016 (see ,14).

Climate change is difficult to encapsulate because it is a wicked problem. 'Users' have demands, addressing these via the IPCC would be useful. It was suggested that a new narrative for IPCC could be '*more solutions⁶ based responses reflecting the needs of its users⁷*'. It was noted that this would be a change of framing of the purpose of the IPCC's review process from one addressing the "problem" of climate change to that of the "problem" of people needing to react to it in an informed manner. Such an idea is consistent with others who has called for the IPCC to adopt a more responsive model and deliver science 'to order' (15). However the use of the word 'solutions' was contentious as solutions may incorrectly imply that climate change is an easily soluble problem.

Participants were also keen to explore how IPCC could also produce more risk-based reporting rather than uncertainty based – risk is easier to understand for people in relation to other aspects of their lives.

Key findings:

- The IPCC is a juggernaut and is unlikely to radically reform itself or its procedures.
- It could, however, work on reframing itself as reacting to the needs of decision makers, rather than reacting the problem of climate change itself.

Testing Narratives for Public Engagement Discussion

The group, comprised of 9 people, quickly agreed that there has been much *small-scale* research, looking at test groups and how narratives land with them. This was agreed to be a good thing, but that much more of this kind of work simply can't quite cut it. We need more "*in the wild*" work to be done outside of sterile focus-group type settings so that the effects of narratives in public discourse can be understood. That

⁵ The subject of a broader set of questions on the IPCC that were not the topic of this meeting

⁶ Read: possible options and opportunities

⁷ Read: those who need to use IPCC reports to make decisions relating to climate change

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means marshalling the research evidence and designing real life campaigns that are closely monitored and studied throughout their implementation. How these narratives are put together is as important to ensure consistency for later comparison.

It was believed that in order to ensure the legitimacy of these efforts the government would have to endorse or legitimise these in some way. However, it would not need to spearhead it. The group made the point that it is a huge investment to go out and test large public narratives. Perhaps policymakers could be persuaded of the importance of this work by showing that it is an investment in the same way we invest in other part of the energy transition. Members outside the group emphasised the need to link large-scale testing to the policy agenda and the difficulties these may face in the prevailing political climate.

This group also raised the issue of risk narratives⁸.

Key findings:

- Small scale testing of narratives has gone far enough.
- We need to think bigger and find ways of testing narratives in the public sphere – especially the development of metrics to assess how effective they are and the duration of resonance amongst audiences.

Policymaker Narratives Discussion

The discussion, made up of 5 attendees, began by noting the diversity of policymakers and the difficulty in treating them as a monolithic audience.

It was noticed that at present there is somewhat of a lack of a clear government narrative on climate in the UK and that we should be concerned about the lack of interest and antipathy in the 'Brexit' community in relation to climate change. Clearly much thought on this topic is warranted.

Many policymakers were described as being afraid of dealing with climate change for fear of being freaks and zealots. Here again, the concern about *doing climate change by stealth* described earlier in this report reared its head. A question may be hanging over politicians, and those interfacing with them, about whether or not to talk about other issues that impact on climate change without talking about climate change. It was suggested that the correct approach might not be to dodge the climate issue but rather to create a more holistic narrative around climate change that incorporates other policy concerns.

Co-benefits are still considered to be effective means of getting policymakers to do the right thing, but empathy may be lacking. It was said that empathy would be the only way to have frank discussions about the real trade-offs when you start talking about massive carbon reductions.

⁸ Narratives that attempt to aide comprehension of uncertainty by describing it as 'risk' - something people are more attuned to dealing with in their daily lives (Example ,17)

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Key findings:

- Politicians cannot be assumed to be a monolithic audience—they are as diverse as the general public.
- Politicians may care about climate but refrain from action due to fear of being seen as a zealot. Perhaps in this instance, stressing co-benefits and climate change's intersection with other issues is most relevant.

Business Narratives

This group was composed of 6 people and started off by unpicking what a green-growth narrative really means. There was a concern that green-growth narratives may assume a simplistic formulation of the problem of climate change; one that assumes that there are no limits to growth. Instead it was suggested that other narratives around the opportunities for business and new technological progress might be more congruent with the way business decisions are routinely made.

The group also considered other narratives that may play well on a national level, such as the benefits to the job market of training people in new transferrable skills.

One participant noted that the best business narratives have arisen from situations where there has been long term certainty; citing the success of carbon tailpipe emissions regulations.

During the feedback session from the group discussions it was noted that it was difficult to find business narratives that would appeal easily to the hydrocarbons industry. One attendee suggested that the most promising narratives could only arise naturally from stable operating environments and with a strong business case for decarbonisation.

Key findings:

- Green-growth narratives may not be a panacea to engaging with business. There are a number of ways in which this narrative may be problematic from both a pragmatic and economic perspective.
- Perhaps immediate attention should be focussed on tougher nuts to crack, for example, narratives that appeal to the hydrocarbons industry.

Close of the Day

The day was finished with a wrap-up discussion, identifying the headline statements from the day. Some of the key points mentioned were:

- *“We need to bring back the tomorrow’s world”*
- *“We need to know when it is appropriate and compelling to talk about climate change’s related issues “*
- *“We need to show communicators that they should not be afraid of making mistakes, so long as they learn from them”*

Discussions were followed by dinner and a well received speech from Dr. Erlend Knudsen who discussed his outreach work with Pole-to-Paris and his inspirational 3000km run from Tromsø, 500km north of the Arctic Circle to Paris ahead of COP21. He explained the motivation from the project and detailed the outreach he had done

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with rural communities, seeing their traditional way of life disappear. Attendees were surprised to find out that Dr. Knudsen has coincidentally visited Imperial College on his run, as shown by a picture he had taken standing outside where the event had been taking place.

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Feedback

After the event, feedback was received from a number of the participants.

It was noted that there remained many unanswered questions about the future of research, perhaps as a result of extensive early discussions on climate narratives in practice.

Most feedback noted how useful it was to have the opportunity to discuss such problems and that it would have been useful to have longer break-out group discussions. These breakout discussions, of around 5-10 people, were said to allow a good diversity of opinion whilst being intimate enough as to allow focussed discussion.

Other participants noted that although it was broadly agreed that there could not be singular climate narratives with universal power, they perceived dissensus about what form strategic narratives would take. On what scale of human organisation is it possible to form strategic narratives, given that even seemingly homogenous groups may have very different values? Given this, is it even possible for the government to have a singular narrative that drives their communications? Some feedback suggested that future discussions around policy narratives would also be beneficial.

Conclusion

The discussion meandered greatly throughout a number of topics, however it frequently returned to a number of key issues that were points of contention and agreement.

The first key theme was the need to drive the narratives agenda forwards, as one attendee put *“talking and researching about storytelling is absolutely no substitute for actually getting out there and doing it”*. There seemed to be an air of frustration that research and communications efforts were limited to small case studies. There remains a question over where the financial and authoritative clout to implement this kind of thing. One attendee said *“We need to be able to make mistakes and learn from them.”* The question is which practitioner should lead this?

Another difficult and recurrent point is the difficulty in determining when and whether we should avoid the central topic of climate change in our communications. Talking about proxies for climate change, such as energy security, may be effective but there are a number of practical and ethical issues surrounding an over-emphasis on these proxies. Clearly practical guidance is needed on this to allow communicators to keep climate change at the fore of people’s concerns and inspire action. This may be especially salient as we consider how climate change can remain resilient in what is often described in the media as an increasingly “post-truth” society.

Finally, many agreed that alongside experimentation, there was scope to share findings across disciplines with a view to developing capacity amongst different communities working in this space. Collaborative processes for the development of methodologies to construct narratives and assess if/how they work are needed. Feedback underlined that this event was a promising first step in driving forwards action in this space.

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