5. Public Opinion and Climate Accountability

The watershed moment was the congressional hearing when the tobacco companies lied and the public knew it. If that had occurred earlier, the public might not have so clearly recognized that the executives were lying. My question is: What do we know about how public opinion changed over time?

—Peter Frumhoff

Throughout several sessions, workshop participants discussed and debated the role of public opinion in both tobacco and climate accountability. It was widely agreed that, in the case of tobacco control, a turning point in public perception came at the 1994 “Waxman hearings” on the regulation of tobacco products. On this highly publicized occasion, a broad swath of the populace became aware that the heads of the major tobacco companies had lied to Congress and the American public. Naomi Oreskes said tobacco litigation helped make this public narrative possible.

Participants grappled with the question of how climate advocates might create a similar narrative for global warming. While there was a good deal of debate about exactly what such a narrative should be, there was widespread agreement that the public is unlikely to be spurred into action to combat global warming on the basis of scientific evidence alone. Furthermore, climate change science is so complex that skeptics within the scientific community can create doubts in the public mind without any assistance from the fossil fuel industry or other climate change deniers.

The Importance of Creating a Public Narrative

Jim Hoggan, a public relations expert and co-founder of DeSmogBlog.com, explained the problem this way: “The public debate about climate change is choked with a smog of misinformation. Denial and bitter adversarial rhetoric are turning the public away from the issue. Communicating into such high levels of public mistrust and disinterest is tricky. We need to do some research into a new narrative.” Hoggan emphasized the importance of linking the industry’s “unjust misinformation” back to an overall narrative about sustainability, rather than getting mired in issues of whose fault climate change is and who should do what to ameliorate the situation. Noting the fact that there is broad and deep support for clean energy, Hoggan suggested the following narrative: “Coal, oil, and gas companies are engaging in a fraudulent attempt to stop the development of clean energy.”
Many participants agreed about the importance of framing a compelling public narrative. Dick Ayres added that the simple act of naming an issue or campaign can be important as well. After acid rain legislation passed in 1990, he recalled, an industry lobbyist told him, “You won this fight 10 years ago when you chose to use the words ‘acid rain.’”

Paul Slovic, a psychologist and expert on risk perception, cited his colleague Daniel Kahneman’s book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, which has shown that people often tend to make snap judgments rather than stopping to analyze. Though a degree of slow thinking is necessary to comprehend climate change, he said, people instead tend to go with their quick first impressions.

Having reviewed two boxes of documents obtained from tobacco marketers by the Justice Department for its RICO case against the tobacco companies, Slovic became convinced that the industry was decades ahead of academic psychologists in understanding the interplay of emotion and reason in decision making. The sophistication of the cigarette makers’ approach showed, he said, in the effectiveness with which they used images of beautiful people doing exciting things, or words like “natural” and “light” that conveyed health (in response to mounting evidence of smoking’s link to lung cancer).

Slovic emphasized that there are huge differences between tobacco and climate risks. “Every hazard is unique, with its own personality, so to speak,” he said. “Does it pose a risk to future generations? Does it evoke feelings of dread? Those differences can make an impact on strategy.” The feeling of dread, specifically, was an important feature in people’s perception of tobacco risks, since they equated smoking with lung cancer.

Here is one possibility for a public narrative: “Coal, oil, and gas companies are engaging in a fraudulent attempt to stop the development of clean energy.”

—Jim Hoggan

This differs from “doom-and-gloom” discussions about climate change, which can tend to turn people off rather than instilling dread. The difference is that climate change risks seem diffuse—distant in both time and location. The situation is even more complicated, Slovic added, by the fact that when people receive a benefit from an activity, they are more inclined to think the risk that activity carries is low. If they receive little benefit, they tend to think the risk is higher. As he explained, “The activities that contribute to climate change are highly beneficial to us. We love them; we are addicted to them.” That, he said, makes the problem of communicating the dangers of climate change all the more difficult.

**Reaching People “Where They Live”**

Several participants emphasized the phenomenon of cultural cognition, including work on the subject by Dan Kahan at Yale Law School. Cultural cognition research suggests that we all carry around with us a vision of a just social order for the world in which we live. Kahan’s work identifies a major division between those who tend toward a worldview based on structure and hierarchy, and those who tend toward a worldview based on egalitarianism. Another axis is individualism versus communitarianism (i.e., whether a higher value is placed on the welfare of the individual or the group). In Kahan’s conception, all of us have a blend of such attributes.