

Changing the Narrative: The Climate Crisis Needs a New Story

Why compelling narratives are the key to political success.

[Oliver Caute](#)



Photo by [Kelly Sikkema](#) on [Unsplash](#)

It's easy to forget that this isn't the first time the world has seemed to teeter on a precipice. 'To the question how shall we ever be able to extricate ourselves from the obvious insanity of this position, there is no answer,' [Hannah Arendt](#) wrote fifty years ago, reflecting on the nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. Then, as now, an apocalyptic mood had become quite normal. Perhaps there is some solace in the fact that as bad as things seemed to Arendt, the world did not end in 1970, or in any of the ends-of-days foretold before and since.

But there is something that makes this present moment different. Although we don't lack for murderous leaders in charge of nuclear stockpiles, it isn't fingers on triggers that pose the greatest threat to our survival; indeed, nothing momentous need happen at all. If we simply keep doing what we are doing, then to the best of our

knowledge, more and more of the planet will catch fire or be submerged under water; coastlines will wash away, glaciers collapse and rivers dry up; soils will desiccate and blow away; and millions will be on the move or dying of disease.

To put it more tersely, if we continue with the same ‘business-as-usual’ trajectory, widespread, irreversible social devastation eventually becomes ‘very likely’. The question, of course, is when ‘eventually’ will be, and whether we can change course between now and then.

Given this, and given everything we know about climate change more broadly, why are we still failing to act? Adam Smith once noted that we are less troubled by the prospect of a hundred million people dying as a result of an earthquake in some distant location than of losing our little finger, but would nevertheless be horrified by the idea we might allow them to die in order to save it. Climate change, much like the scenario hypothesised by Smith, places unprecedented demands on our moral imagination.

One of the depressing things about politics is not simply that elected politicians exist “in the world of the possible” but that those who are about the business of expanding that world are generally dismissed. Yet, if we are to tackle the climate crisis, we need to be in the business of expanding that world — throwing ever greater demand on our moral and political imagination.

Most discussions on climate change start from the curious assumption that if we can just give people the information they need, they will demand change, which, in turn, will force politicians to act legislatively. This is almost completely the wrong way round. Everyone, experts and non-experts alike, converts climate change into stories that embody their own values, assumptions and prejudices. Even our experience of the weather fits this pattern. When asked about recent weather in their own area, people who are already disposed to believe in climate change will tend to say it’s been warmer. People who are unconvinced about climate change will say it’s been colder.

The real problem comes when we start trying to cram climate change into our pre-existing ideological boxes. In the US in particular, climate change has become a central weapon in a culture war between left and right. Attitudes on climate change have become a social cue like gun control: a shorthand for figuring out who is in our group and cares about us. It's isn't information but cultural coding that forms our worldview. Thus, if you're a supporter of Donald Trump, or the MAGA movement (your in-group), then anything an environmentalist (your out-group) tells you is going to be self-evidently wrong, regardless of its factual content — and vice versa.

We need to approach climate change, not as a media battle of science versus vested interests or truth versus fiction (although, of course it is), but as the ultimate challenge to our ability to make sense of the world around us. We have failed to act on climate not because we don't know enough about it, or because we don't know how to prevent it: we have failed to act on it because we've yet to articulate a compelling narrative.



Photo by [Matt Palmer](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We all possess a narrative instinct: an innate disposition to listen for an account of who we are and where we stand. This should not surprise us. Stories are the means by which we understand the world. They allow us to interpret its intricate and contradictory signals. When we confront a complex issue and try to understand it, what we look for is not consistent and reliable facts but a consistent and comprehensible story. When we ask ourselves whether something “makes sense”, the “sense” we seek is not rationality, as scientists and philosophers perceive it, but narrative fidelity. Does what we are hearing reflect the way we expect humans and the world to behave? Does it hang together? Does it progress as stories should progress?

A string of facts, however well attested, will not correct or dislodge a powerful story. The only response it is likely to provoke is indignation: people often angrily deny facts that clash with the narrative “truth” established in their minds. The only thing that can displace a story is a story. As we’ve seen in recent years — in our post-truth world — tapping into people’s emotions has proved far more effective than rational argument. From Trump’s America to Brexit Britain, weaving a good story, featuring fearless protagonists, challenging quests against seemingly insurmountable odds, and soundbite after soundbite of memorable dialogue has been at the heart of political success.

Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis. This is as true of climate breakdown as anything else. We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change. Some are habits of mind, some are industry propaganda. Sometimes, the situation has changed but the stories haven’t, and people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends.

What the climate crisis is, what we can do about it, and what kind of a world we can have is all about what stories we tell and whose stories are heard. Climate change was a story that fell on mostly indifferent ears when it was first discussed in the mainstream more than 30 years ago. Even a dozen years ago, it was supposed to be

happening very slowly and in the distant future. There were a lot of references to “our grandchildren’s time”. It was a problem that was difficult to grasp — this dispersed, incremental, atmospheric, invisible, global problem with many causes and manifestations, whose solutions are also dispersed and manifold.

That voices from the climate movement largely succeeded in making the vast majority understand it, and many care passionately about it, might be the biggest single victory the movement will have. Because once you’ve won the popular imagination, you’ve changed the game and its possible outcomes. But this was a long, slow, arduous process, and misconceptions still abound. Moreover, with the advent of right-wing populists on both sides of the Atlantic, we’ve begun to see a worrying regression. They’ve articulated a narrative — albeit one completely divorced from the scientific reality — that nonetheless seems to be resonating with certain people. As I mentioned, the only thing that can dislodge a story is a story.

We need to leave the age of fossil fuel behind, swiftly and decisively. But what drives our machines won’t change until we change what drives our ideas. In order to do what the climate crisis demands of us, we have to find stories of a liveable future, stories of popular power, stories that motivate people to do what it takes to make the world we need. Perhaps we also need to become better critics and listeners, more careful about what we take in and who’s telling it, and what we believe and repeat, because stories can give power — or they can take it away.

To change our relationship to the physical world — to end an era of profligate consumption by the few that has consequences for the many — means changing how we think about pretty much everything: wealth, power, joy, time, space, nature, value, what constitutes a good life, what matters, how change itself happens.

One climate story we urgently need is one that exposes who is actually responsible for climate chaos. It’s been popular to say that we are all responsible, but this is misleading. Over the past few decades, the carbon impact of the top [1% of the wealthiest human beings was twice that of the bottom 50%](#), so responsibility for the

impact and the capacity to make change is currently distributed very unevenly.

By saying “we are all responsible”, we avoid the fact that the global majority of us don’t need to change much, but a minority needs to change a lot. This is also a reminder that the idea that we need to renounce our luxuries and live more simply doesn’t really apply to the majority of human beings outside what we could perhaps call the overdeveloped world. What is true of Beverly Hills is not true of the majority from Bangladesh to Bolivia.

When it comes to who’s harming the climate, it’s also been popular to focus on individual contributions. The fossil fuel industry likes the narrative of personal responsibility as a way to keep us scrutinising ourselves and one another, rather than them. They’ve promoted the concept of climate footprints as a way to keep the focus on us and not them, and it’s worked. Usually if I ask people what they’re doing about the climate emergency, most will talk about what they’re not consuming or doing — but these will never add up to the speed and scale of change needed to change the system.

One of the goals of system change is to supersede individual virtue. Just as you no longer have to opt in to buying a car with seatbelts or ask for the no-smoking section on the train or restaurant, at some point in the near future you won’t have to opt into travelling in an electric car or bus, or living or working in all-electric buildings. Electrification will have happened because of the collective action that takes shape as policy and regulation.

Another story could be told on energy. Any hope we have of containing the escalating climate crisis depends on getting to net zero, which will mean cutting greenhouse gas emissions drastically in the next few decades. Coal, gas and oil will have to be replaced with clean energy sources. In the language of climate policy, this is known as the green energy transition and is often presented as the latest in a series of transitions that have shaped modern history. The first was from organic energy — muscle, wind and water power — to coal. The second was from coal to hydrocarbons (oil and gas).

The third transition will be the replacement of fossil fuels by forms of renewable energy.

The transition narrative is reassuring because it suggests that we have done something like this before. We owe our current affluence to a sequence of industrial revolutions — steam engines, electricity, Fordism, information technology — that go back to the 18th century. Our future affluence will depend on a green industrial revolution, and to judge by the encouraging headlines, it is already well underway. The standard estimate is that energy transitions take about half a century; if that were true of the green energy transition, it could still be on schedule for 2050.

One story you frequently encounter frames the possibilities in absolutes: if we can't win everything, then we lose everything. There are so many doom-soaked stories out there — about how civilisation, humanity, even life itself, are scheduled to die out. This apocalyptic thinking is due to another narrative failure: the inability to imagine a world different than the one we currently inhabit.

People without much sense of history imagine the world as static. They assume that if the present order is failing, the system is collapsing, and there is no alternative. A historical imagination equips you to understand that change is ceaseless. You only have to look to the past to see such a world, dramatically different half a century ago, stunningly so a century ago. The world in 2050 will look immeasurably different from the world we live in today. The future remains unwritten, offering those who are committed to sustainability an opportunity to make a lasting impact. Just because we've failed thus far, doesn't mean we are condemned to fail in perpetuity.



Photo by [Antoine GIRET](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The science behind climate change has been proven correct to the highest degree of certainty the scientific method allows. But climate change is more than just the science. It's a social phenomenon. And the social dimensions of climate change can make the science look simple — the laws of physics are orderly and neat but people are messy.

When examining how individuals respond to climate change, we are assessing far more than merely their understanding (or lack thereof) of climate science. We're analysing the way they see the world, their politics, values, cultural identity, even their gender identity. It wouldn't be a stretch to say we're measuring their psyche, their innermost self. In his book [Why We Disagree About Climate Change](#), the British professor Mike Hulme argues that this is one of the reasons we argue so much about the issue. "The sources of our disagreement with climate change lie deep within us, in our values and in our sense of identity and purpose," he writes. "They do not reside 'out there', a result of our inability to grasp knowingly some ultimate physical reality."

It follows that to help resolve, even to some degree, the conflict and disagreement about climate change in the community, we need to understand those different belief systems and the emotional responses and social forces that shape them. And take them into account when we communicate about climate change and what should be done.

So when it comes to talking to people about climate change, it helps enormously to think about it not just as a scientific question but as a social and political one. But understanding how people's already existing (and often entrenched) political allegiances influence their response to climate change is only part of the picture. Understanding their emotional reactions is even more important, and that leads us from politics towards psychology.

I'm not saying facts don't matter or the scientific method should be watered down or we should communicate without facts. What I am saying is that now the climate science has been proven to be true to the highest degree possible, we have to stop being reasonable and start being emotional. Twenty years ago we did not have constructive ways to leave the age of fossil fuel behind. Now we do. And the solutions keep getting better. The technical and economic barriers have been crossed and the only impediment to change is political. If we can tell a better story, maybe we'll overcome this final barrier.