

Professor Michael Gordon

University of Michigan: Innovation for a Better World



Can You Change the Climate (for the Better)?

By [Michael Gordon](#) on January 23, 2012 12:39 PM | [No Comments](#) | [No TrackBacks](#)

The [Erb Institute](#) at the University of Michigan along with the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) held a workshop last weekend titled, "Increasing Public Understanding of Climate Risks and Choices: What We Can Learn from Social Science Research and Practice." A video from the public Town Hall can be found [here](#).

As the name of the workshop suggests, the intent was not to advance the science of global warming -- the science is overwhelmingly clear that climate change is occurring, the changes are due to human activity, and the consequences may be extremely destructive. Instead, the intent of the workshop was centered on effective communication to help make these ideas more widely accepted and, most importantly, lead to action.

Some sobering statistics (courtesy of Anthony Leiserowitz of the [Yale Project on Climate Change Communication](#)):

- Various polls (Gallup, Pew, Harris Poll, and others) all show that, since 2006, the public has become less convinced that global warming is happening
- We are also becoming less likely to believe that human activity is the cause
- The majority of the public does not believe there is agreement among most scientists that global warming is happening, and that misperception, too, has become more pronounced in the last few years.
- There are "Six Americas" in terms of general beliefs about global warming, those who are: Alarmed, Concerned, Cautious, Disengaged, Doubtful, and Dismissive. There are approximately the same number of Alarmed or Concerned (37% combined) as there are Disengaged, Doubtful, or Dismissive (35% combined).

Much of the workshop focused on what social science recommends we do to set the facts straight and, more important, create action. Among the the ideas offered were suggestions to make sure that all messaging



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- begins emphatically with the idea that scientists agree that climate change is occurring,
- that it is caused by human activity,
- can lead to drastic changes and
- is solvable if we act

Further, to be effective in communication we must

- understand which of the Six Americas we're addressing
- appropriately tailor messages for each group and
- address them through the appropriate messenger (church congregations are very open to their ministers, e.g.).

But what can *you* do?

Eric Pooley, of the [Environmental Defense Fund](#) and a former reporter, commented on journalists succumbing to "balance bias," where they feel compelled to balance pro's and con's to the point where reporting becomes mush (my word, not his).

Thus, there is a need for *non*-mainstream communication, especially social media. Already we've seen the powerful effects of social media in the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements. Young people can play a strong role in trying to stay informed and spread the truth.

More concretely, it's possible to act as an environmental gadfly. Climate change deniers deliberately attempt to disseminate bad science. (How else can we explain the disconnect between the actual consensus about climate change and the public's misunderstanding?) Where are these views most likely to be published? *Mother Jones*? *The New Republic*? Not likely. What about *The Wall Street Journal*? *Fox News*? You (and friends) might each "adopt" a news outlet that communicates bad science. Vigilantly track everything they publish about the environment and write in to correct errors in fact. Every time.

Or: Help communicate what efforts work (or don't) in addressing climate change. Follow and measure efforts in your own backyard and share them with clearinghouses like [ClimateAccess](#).

Use sources such as this and [NEON](#) when it is up and running to stay informed about the scientific consensus and what people can do to effect change. You do not need to be a geothermal scientist to be informed. But by being informed and acting on your convictions, you just might help us save the planet. (Put me in the America that is Alarmed.)

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