

## Strategic Framing ‘Traps’ – Intelligence Briefs

### INTELLIGENCE BRIEF - Invisible Processes

*Invisible Process.* Naming an issue instead of explaining how it works. Asserting facts or assuming background knowledge on a complex scientific or social issue.

Climate change messaging often stops at asserting that a problem exists – leaving the underlying cause or mechanism invisible in the communication. Communicators fall into the Invisible Process Trap when they fail to explain how a problem works or how people are connected to the problem and its solution. Invisible Process occurs when communicators falsely assume that the public understands the issue and can “fill in the blanks.”

Invisible Process messaging limits the public conversation on climate change in several ways – mainly, by preventing the public from grasping how and why it is happening, and therefore, from considering how and why it might be addressed most productively. If the public does not understand the processes linking fossil fuel use to climate change and its various effects on the oceans, they cannot think through appropriate solutions to the problem. It is important to clear up misconceptions and fill in the gaps in peoples’ understandings so they can understand what is at stake and feel empowered to act.

#### Invisible Process messaging can promote belief that circumstances are unchangeable

If circumstances are presented as a *fait accompli*, then people may decide that the circumstance is simply the way the world is, and there is little to be done. An important goal of communication on social issues is to open up a productive public conversation on solutions to pressing problems. Invisible Process messaging can undermine this goal.

#### Informing the public at a basic level promotes long-term “issue evolution”

For public support and demand for meaningful change to emerge, a basic understanding of the overall problem and its solutions is essential. In order to gain a deeper motivation to do something about climate change, audiences need to understand how it works. Researchers who have investigated the impact of knowledge about climate change on motivation to address the issue found that the single most important predictor of intention to take action was an accurate understanding of what *causes* climate change (Bord, O’Connor, and Fisher 2000; O’Connor et al 1999). Invisible Process messaging contributes to a lack of comprehension of the temporal, spatial, and numerical dimensions of climate change.

#### “Keep it short and simple” is not at odds with an explanatory approach

Communicators often fall into the Invisible Process Trap because they believe that the public has a short attention span and has little appetite for lengthy lectures. It’s true that the public has limited attention on any issue – but this doesn’t preclude an explanatory approach that “connects the dots.” If anything, the scarce nature of public attention makes it more important to take an explanatory approach: If public attention is limited, then strategic communicators must take advantage of every opportunity to explain ‘how the world works’ on issues related to climate and ocean change. Communications can be short and simple *and* explanatory - especially if vetted metaphors are recruited to help translate abstract concepts into concrete, familiar terms.

## INTELLIGENCE BRIEF - Crisis

*Crisis.* 1. A time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger. 2. A time when a difficult or an important decision must be made: "a crisis point in history".

Crisis communications evoke the powerful emotion of fear by highlighting worst-case scenarios. Environmental communicators who frame environmental changes as a crisis are counting on the power of emotions to motivate people to change their thoughts and behaviors. However tempting, social science research suggests that this strategy should be avoided. Presenting climate change as a crisis constructs several cognitive "roadblocks" that prevent visitors from caring about climate change beyond the immediate future and engaging in solutions.

Cognitive Shortcomings of Crisis Messaging:

### Crisis messaging may capture attention, but can't hold it

Crisis messaging takes advantage of our brain's hard-wired ability to maintain vigilance for threats: hints of danger always get our attention. However, when the conscious, reasoning parts of our brain realize that the threat is not immediate, the mind de-prioritizes the issue, rationalizing that there are "more important" things to attend to, or that this issue will not affect us. Psychologists have observed the temporary effect of danger cues on individuals – and political scientists have observed it in society. Even when a crisis captures the public's attention, its effect on opinion is short-lived. For example, the percentage of Americans in favor of offshore drilling dropped from 64 to 44 percent after the Deep Water Horizon rig exploded in April 2010, releasing nearly five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Support for drilling crept up to 51 percent by October, and reached pre-spill levels by 2012.

### Crisis messages can trigger confirmation bias

Confirmation bias refers to peoples' unconscious tendency to pay attention to information that upholds prior views, and to ignore or dismiss information (no matter how well-evidenced) that goes against them. When emotional messaging is framed as a crisis, the confirmation bias effect increases. If the communicator presents a crisis to someone who is already likely to care about the issue, that person will continue to care. But if the crisis message is delivered to someone who does not believe in the underlying claim, that person will cling more firmly to their previously held ideas.

### Crisis messages can promote belief that circumstances are unchangeable

Highlighting extreme consequences or making dire predications may grab the public's attention, but these crisis messaging techniques do not leave the public feeling empowered to take action. If circumstances are presented as a crisis, then people may decide that the problem is too big to be solved and there is little to be done. An important goal of communication on social issues is to open up a productive public conversation on solutions to pressing problems. Crisis messaging can undermine this goal.

### Crisis messages can result in compassion fatigue

The public is faced with a barrage of communications about social issues, many of which are framed as a crisis. When multiple crisis frames compete against each other within a short period of time, people are forced to prioritize them; they pay attention to what they perceive as the most pressing problems and tend to ignore the rest. For example, while many people are concerned about climate change, they rank it as less important as many other social issues such as terrorism, health care or the economy. Crisis messaging can result in "compassion fatigue," or audiences becoming desensitized to social issues in general.

## **INTELLIGENCE BRIEF - Incidents and Accidents**

*Incident:* 1. an individual occurrence or event. 2. a distinct piece of action, or an episode, as in a story or play. 3. something that occurs casually in connection with something else. 4. something appertaining or attaching to something else.

*Accident:* An unfortunate incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally, typically resulting in damage or injury. SEE: mishap - chance - casualty - misadventure - fortuity

Environmental communicators often fall into a trap of believing that if they provide the public with information to overcome their lack of knowledge, public opinion will change. Dramatic events related to the environment seem to offer a perfect opportunity to raise the issue of climate and ocean change. Caution is advised, as dramatic events can overshadow, rather than illuminate, the broader issue. Social science research suggests that non-experts have difficulty connecting a single incident to the larger issue in a way that leads to a more accurate understanding of the overall trend or context.

### Episodic messaging can obscure long-term, systemic nature of climate change

Incidents and accidents are episodic events. They are discrete, happen once, and often happen by chance. Climate change is not an episodic event. It is a problem that has been created over the course of many decades; and the effects well as the widespread and related effects over time. (SEE EXPERT TESTIMONY ON EPISODIC FRAMING.)

### Incidents and accidents grab attention, but don't inspire long-term change

Psychologists have observed the temporary effect of danger cues on individuals, and political scientists have observed it in society. Stories about emergencies take advantage of our brain's hard-wired ability to maintain vigilance for threats: tales of danger and mayhem always get our attention. However, when the conscious, reasoning parts of our brain realize that the threat is not immediate, the mind de-prioritizes the issue, rationalizing that there are "more important" things to attend to, or that this issue will not affect us. Even when provided with correct statistics about the impacts of incidents and accidents, people form low risk perception of the issue. The public has a "finite pool of worry" and when it has been exhausted, they stop paying attention. For example, the percentage of Americans in favor of offshore drilling dropped from 64 to 44 percent after the Deep Water Horizon rig exploded in April 2010, releasing nearly five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Support for drilling crept up to 51 percent by October, and reached pre-spill levels by 2012.

### Information about the impacts of incidents don't change peoples' minds

Simply giving people information does not change their views. Humans are psychologically predisposed to attend to information that upholds what they already understand about the world, and ignore or reject information (no matter how well-evidenced) that goes against it. (This cognitive processing tendency is referred to as "confirmation bias.") Factors such as religious beliefs, values, and prior experience weigh more heavily on peoples' understanding and judgment than proven facts. As a result, people interpret new information in light of what they already know. If the facts don't fit their worldview, people reject the facts.

### Incidents and accidents trigger cognitive associations with several unproductive cultural models

Most news coverage of such events is highly episodic, emphasizing the immediate damage, the "clean up," and the individuals affected by the event. These types of stories make the overall trend toward more frequent and more severe weather harder to tell. Discrete events of environmental degradation often have a memorable visual component to them focusing attention on the effects on the observable surface. Stories about accidents in the ocean invigorate the "pollution" cultural model. Emphasis is on the "clean up," not the long-term damage. A focus on extreme weather calls forth a cultural model of weather as unpredictable, random, and completely out of the control of. Finally, incidents and accidents are often discussed as part of the "progress has winners and losers" debate. This type of thinking inhibits a big picture perspective and considerations of the larger marine habitat are lost.

Take caution in framing incidents and accidents: Extreme weather is too overwhelming to connect to climate change.

Due to the sheer amount of changing scientific facts and figures that people are constantly exposed to, the public can easily become overwhelmed and confused by poorly framed scientific information. In order to open up a productive conversation on climate change, extreme weather events must be framed carefully. Taking advantage of extreme weather – one of the most visible and tangible impacts of climate change – requires a careful set-up of cause and effect. “The heat-trapping blanket effect has increased the Earth’s average temperature, which is changing and destabilizing weather patterns. For instance, if water temperatures are higher than usual, hurricanes can form in places they might not otherwise, and can be more severe than they would in a stable climate system. Scientists tell us that this destabilization is increasing the frequency and severity of storms like Hurricane Sandy.”

## INTELLIGENCE BRIEF - Cute Critters

*Anthropomorphism.* Ascribing human motivation, emotion, characteristics or behaviors to inanimate objects, animals or natural phenomena.

*Charismatic megafauna.* Large animal species with widespread popular appeal that some environmental communicators use to direct public attention to particular environmental issues. Prominent examples in the marine ecosystems include: polar bears, seals, and whales.

The Cute Critter Trap is ultimately about anthropomorphizing. In cognitive terms, anthropomorphizing is the opposite of dehumanizing or distancing. In other words, it brings people emotionally closer to non-human agents and things. In evolutionary terms, here's how it works: Human brains are hardwired to be attracted to things that are neotenous, or baby like. We automatically want to take care of creatures that are 'cute.' Following this cognitive pathway, humans are more likely to care about animals that resemble us (a chimp or an otter, for example) than those we see as different (snakes, and other 'creepy crawlies').

Environmental communicators have observed that Cute Critters can capture interest, evoke sympathy or other emotions, and even catalyze individual behavior changes. (Research suggests that people who anthropomorphize are more likely to become vegan and adopt pets from a shelter, for example.) However, framing climate change with Cute Critters should be avoided. Anthropomorphizing creates several cognitive "roadblocks" that prevent visitors from understanding the relationship of creatures to their ecosystems, and how they are connected to human-caused environmental issues.

### Stories focused on lovable characters can obscure systemic nature of climate change

Charismatic megafauna are unforgettable main characters, but they may overshadow other parts of the story. A focus on "cute critters" as the stars of climate change stories can obscure the complexity of ocean systems disruption. Public attention focuses on the critter, not the situation that caused the critter to experience some hardship due to climate change. More dangerously, the scope of actions is limited. Saving the polar bears just takes a donation, right?

### Anthropomorphizing inhibits understanding of animals and their ecosystems

Anthropomorphic thinking can prevent an accurate understanding of the biology and behavior of animals. For example, if visitors are encouraged to think of an animal as "like a human," they are less likely to understand non-human behavioral traits, or they may imagine the animal to have unrealistic behaviors and motivations. Or they may simply dislike animals seen to display unwanted humanlike traits instead of understanding these qualities within environmental and evolutionary context. The overall effect is at odds with the goal of effective science translation.

### Anthropomorphizing reproduces unproductive hierarchies

By placing value on animals that are more like humans, anthropomorphizing reproduces social hierarchies of man and nature, with man separate from and above nature. While this thinking supports the idea that humans have dominion over other species, and are therefore responsible for their well-being, it is ultimately unproductive. Researchers in environmental education advocate a "post-human" approach that teaches the public "interspecies articulation." This strategy encourages people to relate to the environment as part of nature, not above and separate from it. It is about the value of interdependence, or discovering the connections between visitors and the non-human world with emphasis on how humans and other animals continuously create the conditions for each others' existence.