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Julia Coombs Fine

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Climate Justice Communication: Strategies from U.S. Climate Activists

Julia Coombs Fine

Environmental Studies, College of St. Benedict & St. John's University, Bethesda, MD, USA

ABSTRACT

Despite the rise of climate justice movements worldwide, climate justice concerns are insufficiently addressed in recent U.S. policy, and public understanding is not yet widespread. To explore possible avenues for climate justice communication, this analysis examines U.S. climate activists' recommended target audiences and communication strategies. Drawing on 67 conversational interviews and 112 online surveys with activists, the analysis discusses strategies for engaging two high-priority audiences: (1) social justice advocates who do not see the climate crisis as a justice issue and (2) climate action advocates who do not view climate justice as integral to climate solutions. The analysis also identifies a low-priority audience category of *climate justice deniers*, or people who—independent of their views on the climate crisis itself—are apathetic to its social justice implications. These results propose a novel audience segmentation for climate justice communication and consolidate activists' recommendations for engaging each audience, thus providing a grounding for further experimental work.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the United States appears to have made long-overdue progress towards addressing the climate crisis. The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, for example, has been heralded as “the most significant measure ever adopted by the U.S. Congress to combat climate change” (Glicksman, 2023), and includes provisions for combatting air pollution and funding renewable energy projects in low-income communities (Yarmuth 2022). Also in 2022, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed tripling the “social cost of carbon”—its calculation of the damages resulting from missed work and death resulting from climate disasters—from \$51 per ton of carbon dioxide to \$190 (Hersher, 2023). Yet the Inflation Reduction Act also supports the fossil fuel industry through lease reinstatements and royalties (Inflation Reduction Act 2022), and the Environment Protection Agency's proposed social cost of carbon equates the death of one American with the deaths of 55 Somalians (Hersher, 2023).

These grotesque necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) are symptomatic of widespread lack of understanding of climate justice in the U.S. Politically conservative publics, in particular, often frame climate equity concerns as implausible and ludicrous. For instance, when U.S. vice president Kamala Harris asked whether NASA could use satellite images to track tree equity, conservative commenters Tweeted jeering responses using the hashtag #BlackTreesMatter (a satire of the anti-racist hashtag #BlackLivesMatter).¹ Even outside of politically conservative contexts, unequal responsibilities

CONTACT Julia Coombs Fine  jfine001@csbsju.edu  Environmental Studies, College of St. Benedict & St. John's University, 4911 Battery Lane Apt 101, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA

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for the climate crisis are obscured by discourses that indiscriminately place the blame for the climate crisis on “humans” or “us”: one noteworthy example is the Anthropocene, which foregrounds human impacts on the environment but is silent as to which humans are responsible.² In addition to these erasures of the unjust causes and effects of the climate crisis, discourses of overpopulation place the blame on impacted communities, arguing that impoverished people in the Global South have brought about ecological disaster by having too many children (Gosine, 2010); in actuality, the wealthiest 1% of the world’s population produce more emissions than the poorest 50% (Karthä et al., 2020).

As a Global North superpower, a top fossil fuel emitter (Daniel Tang, 2022; Ritchie et al., 2020), and a hotbed of within-nation climate injustice due to environmental racism (Bullard, 1999; Wilson et al., 2010), the United States has a responsibility of climate justice both to the Global South and to its own marginalized communities. Insofar as civil society has a voice in policymaking, it is therefore necessary to convey not just the severity of climate change, but also the guiding principles of climate justice to U.S. publics—that is, to engage in, and hone techniques for, *climate justice communication* (Roosvall & Tegelberg, 2020). Additionally, climate justice communication is of strategic as well as moral importance as a way to build broad, powerful coalitions rather than siloed single-issue efforts (Di Chiro, 2008; Klein, 2014, p. 461; LeQuesne, 2019). To investigate strategies for climate justice communication, this analysis draws on 67 interviews and 112 online surveys with U.S. climate justice organizers, asking about their experiences as both audiences and messengers for climate justice communication. The results reveal two promising audiences for climate justice communication: (1) social justice advocates not engaged in climate work and (2) climate activists not focused on social justice. I discuss activists’ recommended strategies for engaging each of these audiences, providing the basis for further experimental work in these areas.

2. Climate justice communication

Arising from environmental justice movements, climate justice highlights the inequalities inherent to the climate crisis: those who have contributed the least to climate change (including low-wealth communities, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities, nations in the Global South, and youth) disproportionately experience its effects, as well the effects of extractive industries (Harlan et al., 2015). Furthermore, many climate change mitigation and adaptation measures are designed without the leadership of frontline communities (i.e. communities most directly affected by the climate crisis), resulting in climate “solutions” that exacerbate the oppression these communities already face (Mercer et al., 2012). In contrast to NGOs, which often call for emissions reductions within capitalist and colonial systems, climate justice demands solutions that are community-determined, decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist (della porta & Parks, 2014; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Climate justice movements in the U.S. include Indigenous resistance to oil pipelines such as the Dakota Access Pipeline (Bowles & Veltmeyer, 2022; Estes, 2019), abolitionist approaches stemming from Black radical thought (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021), coalitional efforts to address immigrant justice and climate justice (Thomas Black et al., 2016), and disability justice organizing that attends to the intersections of disability, environmental racism, and vulnerability to climate disasters (Jampel, 2018; Kosanic et al., 2022).

Dominant representations of climate injustice do not typically align with these goals, instead depicting impacted communities through distorted victim-hero dichotomies that reinscribe capitalism and colonialism. On the one hand, framing women, climate migrants, and Indigenous communities as “victims” occludes their agency (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Dreher & Voyer, 2015), licensing colonial outsiders to intervene in their affairs (de Onís, 2018), and may even blame these communities for perceived failure to adapt to the climate crisis (Whyte et al., 2017). On the other hand, portraying impacted groups such as women and youth as “heroes” or “resilient” can displace responsibility onto them instead of onto polluters and inactivist policy-makers (Cretney, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2022) or play into white saviorist narratives that depict Global North heroes and

Global South victims (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). This misrepresentation compounds the linkage of environmentalism with a white, affluent, colonizer persona, which overshadows the longstanding environmental activism of low-wealth communities of color (Taylor, 1997).

In defiance of dominant depictions, frontline communities (those most impacted by climate injustice) use a range of communicative strategies to strive for climate and environmental justice. Many of these strategies create communities of resistance focused around a sense of place and history. For instance, toxic tours in Cancer Alley, Louisiana draw attention to the links between slavery and fossil fuel exploitation (Pezzullo, 2003), “archipelagic rhetoric” emplaces Chamorro people on their waters and lands in the face of settler militarism (Na’puti, 2019), marginalized American Indian nations contest federal instrumentalization of the Yucca Mountains as a nuclear waste sacrifice zone by emphasizing its sacredness (Endres, 2012), and Awá discourses of territorialidad—Indigenous connection to territory—disrupt Western discourses of development (Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). Frontline discourses of climate justice are powerful for movement-building. In the case of anti-pipeline resistance in the U.S., for instance, discourses of place and history have captured national attention and strengthened public support for Indigenous land defense (Dhillon, 2019).

Frontline communicators’ emphasis on place has a complicated relationship with the problem of psychological distance, which is common in dominant climate discourses. The psychological distance of climate change can be broken down into hypothetical distance (likeliness vs. unlikeliness), temporal distance (present vs. future), spatial distance (here vs. faraway), and social distance (happening to the self vs. happening to others) (McDonald et al., 2015, p. 111). It is generally argued that framing the climate crisis as close rather than distant along these dimensions is conducive to concern and action, although exceptions do occur (ibid.). While the linkage of environmentalism with privilege can make some impacted communities perceive climate change as distant, the psychological distance of climate change tends to be more pronounced among those who have not experienced its impacts, such as affluent white people (Pearson et al., 2017). When addressing these privileged audiences, it is challenging to make climate change seem close to home while centering climate justice. In other words, focusing on the injustices faced by frontline communities could increase perceived social and spatial distance, giving non-frontline audiences the impression that the climate crisis does not and will not affect them.

Another challenge for climate justice communication is the pervasive distortion of climate action. For instance, the fossil fuel industry’s concerted efforts to shift blame onto individual consumers (Supran & Oreskes, 2021) often equate climate action with lifestyle changes that are inadequate to address the climate crisis (Whitmarsh et al., 2021) and have been argued to distract from more substantive behaviors such as political advocacy and social movement participation (Cuomo, 2011; Stafford & Jones, 2019). While lifestyle-centered discourses promote misdirected action, two other dominant discourses promote inaction under the auspices of extreme optimism and extreme pessimism, respectively. The discourse of techno-optimism, which argues that the climate crisis will surely be resolved through technological innovation and/or market solutions, has been argued to decrease support for adaptation and mitigation measures by promoting a false sense of safety (Alexander & Rutherford, 2019; Gardezi & Gordon Arbuckle, 2020). On the flip side, the growing trend of “climate doomism” paralyzes would-be activists with the belief that apocalypse is already guaranteed (Mann, 2021). Those mainstream narratives of climate action that do address collective action predictably revolve around Global North activists such as Greta Thunberg (Barnes, 2021; Schreiber, 2021). Of course, it is not the sole responsibility of frontline communities to educate others on just, timely, and substantive climate action; this is also a task for more privileged allies.

Interwoven in the above challenges is the question of audiences: who should climate justice communicators address? Existing audience segmentation models attend to political affiliation (Gehlbach et al., 2019; Hassol, 2008; Whitmarsh & Corner, 2017) and audiences’ levels of concern or dismissiveness about the climate crisis (Leiserowitz et al., 2021). While audience political affiliation

and concern level are both relevant considerations for climate justice communication, they do not tell the full story. Political affiliation only partially explains alignment with climate justice movements, since many climate NGOs are at least superficially politically progressive but do not focus on climate justice, and may even censor the voices of impacted communities (Quinn-Thibodeau & Wu, 2016). Furthermore, concern level has been measured only in relation to the climate crisis as a whole, rather than climate injustice.

To take a step towards an audience segmentation model grounded in the experiences of climate justice communication practitioners, this study examines U.S. climate justice organizers' recommendations for target audiences, as well as their recommended strategies for engaging these audiences. Activists' experiences are a valuable source of insight because they reveal both challenges and success cases of using specific communication strategies with particular audiences (see Wolf & Moser, 2011 on the importance of small-scale, in-depth studies for examining success cases in climate change communication).

3. Data sources and methods

The main source of data is 67 hour-long semi-structured interviews with climate justice organizers³ working in various regional organizations and hubs of national organizations across the U.S. In addition, I draw on 112 online surveys with U.S. climate organizers. Participants had the option of participating in both the survey and the interview, with the survey responses providing a broad overview of climate justice communication audiences and strategies and the interviews providing an opportunity to go into greater depth (for instance, through follow-up questions that elicited narratives and longer examples). Forty-nine out of 67 interviewees also took the survey. Participants were contacted through organization websites, email listservs, forums, and social media hashtags that mentioned climate justice in their description of their activities. The sample includes grassroots organizers, staff members of nonprofit climate organizations, and climate communication experts such as narrative strategists. When contacting organizations and individuals, priority was given to those made up of or working closely with frontline communities, as determined by reviewing their websites or bios.

Because of the importance of positionality in climate justice communication, survey and interview participants were asked to provide demographic information via multiple choice questions with write-in options, including ethnoracial identity, gender, age, location, political orientation, predominant political orientation of their region, income over the past year, and the degree to which they were impacted by climate change. The distribution of race and ethnicity was roughly comparable to national data, but fewer survey and interview participants self-identified as white and Latine, and more self-identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Indigenous, or Indigenous and Chicana. The median age range was 35–44 for survey participants and 25–34 for interviewees. A majority of participants (65% of survey participants and 67% of interviewees) said they had been personally impacted by the climate crisis. Many also said that their community was not well represented in environmental movements, that their community was disproportionately impacted by climate change, and that they would face financial difficulty if a climate disaster occurred where they lived; fewer participants said that they would be in more danger than others in the event of a climate disaster (Table 1). Full demographic information is available in Appendix A.

Survey and interview questions asked participants to reflect on their experiences communicating about climate justice (as well as climate change more broadly), including which audiences they prioritized and which strategies they used to engage these audiences. Sample questions include: (1) "Which kinds of people do you think are most important to talk to about climate change, climate action, and climate justice?" (2) "Who, if anyone, is not an important audience to talk to about these topics?" and (3) "In your experience, what strategies are effective for talking to people about climate justice?" Informed consent was obtained via online forms. The survey and interview questions are included in Appendix B. The interviews were shaped by my positionality as a white woman

Table 1. Degree to which participants were affected by the climate crisis, vulnerable to climate impacts, and represented in environmental movements.

Category	Label	Interviewees	Survey participants
Climate impactedness	"I have been personally impacted by climate change"	65%	67%
	"My community is not well represented in many environmental movements"	46%	57%
	"My community is disproportionately impacted by climate change"	40%	46%
	"If a climate disaster occurred where I live, I would probably face financial difficulty"	38%	45%
	"If a climate disaster occurred where I live, I would probably be in more danger than others"	22%	23%

with three years of experience organizing with the Sunrise Movement, Citizens' Climate Lobby, and Extinction Rebellion. These organizations' varied conceptualizations of and efforts towards climate justice have prompted me to examine strategies of climate justice communication from a pluriversal perspective, that is, with a consideration that seemingly contradictory strategies may yield positive outcomes within their respective contexts.

Interview data and open-response survey questions were analyzed in ATLAS.ti using grounded theory to identify emerging patterns in the data (Strauss, 1987). I developed inductive labels within two top-down discourse topics elicited by the survey and interview questions: recommended target audiences and strategies for climate justice communication. Since some participants interpreted the questions as referring broadly to climate change communication—perhaps an indication that "climate justice" is taking on a generic meaning—I only included responses that talked specifically about climate justice, for instance in the sense of unequal responsibility, unequal affectedness, and systemic change lead by frontline communities. I also coded strategies for communicating with each of the suggested target audiences, again using inductive labels. While the analysis of target audiences focuses on audiences recommended by many participants, the analysis of strategies includes strategies recommended by only a few participants, providing novel insights in addition to commonly agreed upon practices.

Due to ethical considerations about assigning pseudonyms (see Grinyer, 2009), participants were given the option to use their real name or a pseudonym, and to list or not list their organizational affiliation.

4. Results: audiences and strategies for climate justice communication

The analysis reveals two main audiences for climate justice communication: social justice advocates not working on climate justice (mentioned by 38 participants) and climate activists not working on social justice (mentioned by 41 participants). In section 4.1, I examine participants' recommendations for engaging social justice advocates, which include intersectional framings of climate harms and climate solutions. In section 4.2, I discuss participants' recommendations for engaging climate activists, which include linking climate justice to local, relatable impacts and opposing "false solutions" that jettison justice concerns. In section 4.3, I analyze participants' reflections on *climate justice deniers* (people who are apathetic to justice concerns in relation to climate change), who participants consider a low-priority audience.

4.1. Social justice advocates not working on climate

Activists mentioned past success in engaging social justice advocates—including impacted community members and allies—in climate justice work, suggesting that this audience can be an important group to address. However, they noted a major barrier to engaging social justice advocates: lack of capacity. When asked what prevented people in their networks from taking action on climate

change, survey participants most commonly cited preoccupation with other concerns (23 out of 104 responses) and lack of free time (17 out of 104 responses). One respondent noted, “Something that I feel prevents people from getting involved is being poor or working class and BIPOC because there’s already an economic stress and racial injustice on the minds of those folks that they don’t have the bandwidth to get involved.” In other words, the compounding stressors of economic and racial injustice can exclude those who are most impacted by the climate crisis from joining movements to resist it. In the following sections, I discuss climate activists’ recommendations for framing climate justice impacts and solutions in a way that resonates with impacted audiences and others working on social justice.

Discuss intersectional impacts

Discussing intersectional impacts of climate change may help to counteract the distancing of climate change from the everyday concerns of frontline communities. For example, diversity, justice, equity, and inclusion specialist Mr. Jordan related how the dominant framings of climate change—which revolved around “Al Gore, polar bears, and tree huggers”—failed to resonate with his lived experiences as an affected community member (1).

(1) Growing up in the South Bronx, I never really realized how much climate justice really affected me, because like I told you, the only thing I ever heard was Al Gore, polar bears, and tree huggers. Growing up, I mean, we call it a concrete jungle. There’s not a lot of trees. So realizing that because of that, it’s 10–15 degrees hotter in the communities that I live, you combine that with the food deserts, where I can go to the corner store and I can purchase juice [...] I think a lot of times we look at a climate and we think of the rain forests, or we think on a grander scale, but it’s also the communities that we live in. [...] It wasn’t until I got older that I started realizing, and as of recently really understanding, how the work that I do with regards to diversity, equity, justice and inclusion, how the climate part of it needs to be a part of that, because they go hand in hand.

Jordan’s criticism of the polar bear as the unofficial mascot of climate change communication parallels critiques from climate change communication scholars, who have argued that emphasizing the effects of the climate crisis on polar bears “reinforces the sense that this [the climate crisis] is far away” (Leiserowitz, cited in Osaka, 2018). Similarly, one survey respondent recommended that climate communications should “address that climate change is not a ‘polar bears and ice caps’ problem (challenging previous failed climate communication strategies) but is instead about issues like racial justice, immigrant rights, gender equality, etc.”

Jordan’s addition of Al Gore and tree huggers alongside polar bears demonstrates that social distance, as well as physical distance, can make frontline communities perceive the climate crisis as faraway. In particular, the whiteness and affluence of climate messengers can make the climate crisis seem faraway to low-wealth communities of color. Expanding on why Al Gore’s climate communication efforts (such as the 2006 documentary film “An Inconvenient Truth”) did not resonate with him, Jordan remarked on Al Gore’s privileged positionality as a “tall rich white man” (2).

(2) [The image of the environmentalist] seems like someone who is just like, “Well hey, you know what, I’ve done so well in my life, let me just take some time to look into the environment. Let me focus on that.” Because for a long time, the spokesperson was Al Gore. That was the main spokesperson, that was the individual that was always out there. So here we have a tall rich white man that’s communicating all of this that’s supposedly affecting all communities, yet he’s not a representative of all communities. [...] It takes away from me being able to receive that information because a lot of times, the sender is going to be that obstacle.

Jordan’s voicing of Al Gore’s decision to focus on the environment because “I’ve done so well in my life” highlights how Gore’s prominence created an indexical link between privilege and climate concern, the inverse of which suggests that marginalized people are not or should not be concerned about climate impacts. Similarly, professor, former meteorologist, and community organizer Bird Book commented, “Once you show people how it’s affecting their community, in narratives, in storytelling within that group, not from a white person’s perspective, ‘This is what they’re doing to you,’ but in the group ... then you can support and encourage and collaborate with those groups. But ... it can’t be top-down.” These observations highlight the need to support climate

communicators from affected communities in order to decrease the perceived social distance of the climate crisis and highlight its intersectional impacts.

Activists' reflections further suggest that social justice advocates who are not themselves front-line community members can also be engaged through intersectional framings of climate impacts. Interviewee Maithilee Kanthi, a climate justice organizer with Clean Wisconsin and a former organizer with the Sunrise Movement, provided an example of how her own views on the climate crisis changed when she learned of its social justice impacts (3).

(3) I used to think of climate change as, like, "It's an environmental issue. It's important, but someone else can worry about it and I will worry about the problems that affect people." And I went into college thinking I was going to work on refugee rights because the Syrian refugee crisis was the biggest thing happening around that time. [...] I attended a talk by a UN representative who told us how climate change was going to cause a refugee crisis 10 times the scale of what we've ever seen before, because of sea level rise and desertification and this and that. And I was like, "Oh my goodness, climate change is a people problem."

Kanthi's reflections reveal how hearing about the future impacts of the climate crisis on refugees moved her from dichotomizing environmental issues and human rights issues to conceptualizing them as intersectional. She further noted that she has since persuaded others of the need for climate justice organizing by pointing out the social justice impacts of the climate crisis and offering to work collaboratively to address these impacts: "Maybe you haven't noticed, but in like five years, ten years, this is going to be a predominant issue on the topic that you're concerned about. Let's work on it together right now." Sincere offers of collaboration can result in transformational rather than transactional organizing (Han, 2014), helping to knit together coalitions of climate and social justice movements.

Discuss co-benefits

Analogous to the importance of discussing intersectional impacts of the climate crisis is discussing intersectional climate solutions, or as they are often termed, the "co-benefits" of solutions. As Jordan reflected, "I come from a community where the climate obviously is impacting us, but what's impacting us even more is the fact that you can look out your house and be murdered just for walking out of your house because of the high levels of crime, drugs, and all of these things. So it's kind of hard to say, 'Hey, well the climate ... !'" He described a community project that bought abandoned buildings, increased their energy efficiency, and established community gardens (4).

(4) As we walked around the neighborhood, not only can I see the faces of the individuals, but people drove by, beeped the horn, and were like, "Hey, how you doing?" It was that sense of community that I know is a direct result of this work that ultimately is not only bettering the community, but it's bettering the climate within that community. [...] You walk around and you see a lot of houses with solar panels on the roofs and houses that are getting digged out because they're installing geothermal, and the reliance on this energy is being lowered, and it's making people more self-sustainable. So I think that that's an example of me seeing it, because now I'm walking—it's not someone telling me, it's not someone showing me a picture, it's actually now. I'm there. I'm walking, I'm breathing within that community, and I can see it first-hand.

In this excerpt, Jordan emphasizes the importance of direct observation of the intersectional benefits of climate solutions. While direct observation may not be possible in many climate communication contexts, climate communication could draw on testimonials and video from first-hand observers to highlight the benefits of climate actions.

Climate activists reported that, in addition to improved safety, some of the most compelling co-benefits to highlight are affordability and health benefits. Brady Fergusson, director of public engagement with the Climate Solutions Accelerator of the Genesee Finger Lakes region, discussed these goals in the context of promoting the use of heat pumps for low-income households. He noted that poverty was common in the area, with people spending 20–25% of their monthly income on their home energy bill. He added that burning gas in homes presents health risks that can be avoided through electric energy (39:03–41:27). Intersectional climate solutions like heat pumps, which address economic justice and health justice while lowering carbon emissions, can aid climate communication across partisan divides: Fergusson explains that team members in conservative-

leaning communities find it more useful to lead with the financial benefits of implementing heat pumps and home weatherization than to mention the reduction in fossil fuel pollution. Highlighting the intersectional benefits of climate action therefore appears to be an effective strategy across audiences, and may be particularly well-suited to communicating with communities that are impacted by poverty, violence, and social justice concerns other than climate.

Messages about the intersectional benefits of climate action can also originate within the audience; that is, climate activists can encourage audiences to envision how climate solutions could positively change their lives. Jeff Feng, an organizer with the Central Coast Climate Justice Network, described using this strategy at the end of phonebanking conversations: “Sometimes I take a more uplifting kind of emotional register and try to energize them about the possibilities of what could change. I think that’s important, especially as you go toward the end of the conversation.” As Alexis Goggans demonstrated, this approach can be grounded in audiences’ dissatisfaction with their current living and working conditions (5).

(5) I would also just ask people, “How are you living? Even if we solve the climate crisis, with the current state of the economy, democracy, and environment, is this how you want to live?” [...] And then I would ask them, “Well, what’s your income level? What’s your proximity to power and education and privilege? And if you were a person who didn’t have access to resources and education or power, how do you think you would feel about the economic system and the way that we live right now?”

Goggans’ strategy invites audiences to consider how intersectional climate solutions could improve their own lives and those of others, not only in the abstract, but in specific ways. By tying climate solutions to an overarching vision—whether already realized or still hypothetical—of better living conditions, climate communicators can encourage audiences to become more aware of their personal stake in climate justice.

4.2. Climate advocates not working on social justice

Activists also recommended engaging audiences working on climate action who do not see the need for just solutions. This category includes those who perceive justice-focused solutions to be too time-consuming, those who place their faith in technological and market-driven solutions rather than systemic change, and those who focus only on lifestyle changes to the exclusion of collective climate action. The following sections begin with general strategies for fostering concern about climate injustice, then discuss strategies for engaging specific climate activist audiences.

Emphasize local climate justice issues

Like the climate crisis as a whole, climate justice concerns are often framed and perceived as far-away in time and space. Several organizers remarked that many people have a “not my problem” attitude towards climate justice. Organizer Maeve Rose noted, “There’s a group of people that I think are apathetic and don’t really see how the work relates to their daily lives, or the problem feels far away. Some people might even be like, ‘It’s a problem, but it’s not going to be a problem for me.’” Another organizer, Ana, similarly commented, “A lot of people are just like, ‘Oh well it’s not my problem,’ like they have this idea that somehow it’s the person’s fault if they’re struggling.” This characterization reveals that apathy can combine with a sense of not being personally affected by the climate crisis, leading to inaction; this is one of the core challenges of communicating with non-frontline audiences.

One way to counteract this mentality of apathy and distance is to point out instances of climate injustice on the local scale. For instance, Johannah Blackman, Executive Director of Maine Climate to Thrive, explained how her organization discusses examples of climate injustice in her island community (6).

(6) Here on this island in Maine, we have quite a diversity of economic standing. The wealthy people on this island can own solar, but the lower to moderate income households are encouraged to just subscribe to it because they can’t own it and build that type of equity for themselves. Well, right there, there’s an example

of climate injustice. Or that we're having these conversations about what needs to happen in our community and there are working class populations on this island that aren't involved in those conversations because they're at work when those conversations are happening. There are direct examples in the community, and when we can spotlight those, I think people start to understand what it means.

Blackman's emphasis on "direct examples in the community" suggests that examples of climate injustice resonate when they are not only in close geographic proximity to the audience, but in the same social network. The tactic of emphasizing local instances of climate injustice complements Jordan's and Fergusson's proposed strategy of highlighting local benefits of climate solutions. While some audiences may remain apathetic to these place-based appeals, which are premised on compassion for marginalized community members at the local level, they may be more successful than global and abstract framings at increasing audiences' understanding of climate justice.

Promote empathy with people who are affected by the climate crisis

Activists also shared that promoting empathy with impacted people can increase climate concern among those less directly affected. Several interviewees recommended telling detailed stories about personal experiences of climate change as a way to elicit empathy. For instance, interviewee Alexa Fay reflected on her experiences as a healthcare worker during a severe heatwave, commenting, "I think it's different saying like, 'Oh, you know people died in the heat wave, and the heat wave was because of fossil fuels,' versus like, 'I had to work during the heat wave and it was terrifying because we just kept having to check in with people and make sure they were not having heat-stroke.'" Fay's narrative transforms the impersonal tone of statistical reporting on climate disasters by particularizing the casualties to the patients she treated.

Activists also suggested promoting empathy with affected people by highlighting interests they share with less affected audiences. Sof Petros, an organizer with the Future Coalition, shared how she implemented this strategy with her brother (7).

(7) My brother is a big hunter. He's a very responsible and ethical hunter. [...] We talked about like fishing stuff. I was like, "Well, what about bomb tests? They really are destroying marine life during all these bomb tests and it's really hurting the ability of people in the Pacific to fish, and *you* love fishing." And he's like, "What? Wait, oh my God. I'm looking into that, talking to other people." [...] And so I think that's also a good way too, of getting people to care about people: other people should have the right and the ability to do the things that you really care about, but here's what's getting in their way.

Rather than focusing only on the effects of bomb tests on the environment per se, or portraying impacted Pacific communities as undifferentiated victims, Petros used her knowledge of her brother's interests (hunting and fishing) to make these affected communities more relatable to him. This strategy may be particularly useful when the messenger is aware of the audience's interests and when there are few or no local climate impacts to discuss, and it can work against the pervasive framing of people in the global South as passive victims (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Shea et al., 2020). However, it is limited in that empathy can be selective and biased (Ray, 2020); in the context discussed in excerpt 7, it only works to emphasize problems faced by hunters and fisherfolk. Therefore, while promoting empathy with affected people elsewhere may help increase climate concern in the absence of local impacts, this strategy should be used with critical attention to the ramifications of empathizing with some groups over others.

Advocate for systemic solutions

In addition to discussing local climate impacts and promoting empathy with affected people, participants recommended talking about systemic solutions. They noted that non-justice-oriented climate activists sometimes have unsubstantiated faith in market mechanisms and technological innovation: narrative strategist Patrick Reinsborough commented, for instance, that "techno-fixes" such as geo-engineering and carbon capture and storage are "desperate efforts to paper over the obvious reality that what we need is system change." Climate justice consultant and organizer Alexis Goggans similarly argued that market-driven and technological solutions are rooted in a capitalist mindset, recommending solutions stemming from "native science, traditional ecological

wisdom, Afro-Indigenous wisdom, and place-based wisdom” instead, and organizer and academic researcher Theo LeQuesne likewise observed that “neoliberal market solutions” may seem like useful strategy for appealing to center-right audiences, yet are fundamentally ineffective, unjust, and counterproductive (see also Gilbertson’s 2017 critique of market-based solutions).

When another organizer, Ana, recommended talking about solutions as a way of overcoming despair, I asked if there were “better or worse ways of talking about solutions” and wondered how she would reply to people who embrace the techno-optimist mindset that “we have all the technology we need, the market will figure it out, let’s sit back and do nothing.” Ana responded that she would problematize market-based and technological solutions on the grounds that they have already proven ineffective, as well as oppressive (8).

(8) Yeah, people do say that. And I guess I just feel like if that was true like it would have happened by now like. [...] We have known about this for so long, and people have been trying everything and nothing meaningful, in the US at least, has happened yet. So obviously we have to do something different. [...] And actually I do think, probably, eventually the market would make these solutions, but the market never accounts for justice and equity. [...] It will just exacerbate inequalities. [...] So if you really care about climate justice and not leaving people behind, then you have to do something else.

Ana’s counterarguments to faith in technological fixes and automatic market solutions were to point out that (1) if these automatic solutions were going to work, they already would have given how long climate science has been established, and (2) market solutions do not automatically remedy climate injustice, but increase it. For the latter argument to gain traction, it is necessary to encourage people to empathize with those who would be “left behind” by these quick fixes. See section 4.3 for more strategies on inspiring compassion in those who are apathetic to climate injustice.

A potential counterargument to the value of systemic climate solutions over techno-fixes and market solutions is the perception that such solutions are inherently slow, and are therefore a luxury that we cannot afford. As communications strategist CeeCee Bloom commented, “This false narrative around scarcity of time and urgency that keeps us from doing justice is one of the bigger challenges.” Karen Jeffers-Tracy, a librarian and organizer with The Climate Mobilization, provided her perspective as someone who previously believed that climate justice was “slowing us down,” but came to feel otherwise due to online trainings about the root causes of climate change (9).

(9) In the climate movement, I always felt that the justice conversations were slowing us down and distracting us and throwing obstacles in the path of actually getting anything done. During the pandemic, The Climate Mobilization offered lots of online trainings. So I went to those and I learned a lot about how climate change wouldn’t actually even be a problem right now if it hadn’t been for the exploitation of labor, most of which were disadvantaged peoples. [...] Here in our local area, I’m hoping that we have community dialogues about how the needs of marginalized communities can be met by the sustainability strategy roll out.

Jeffers-Tracy’s experience reveals that a deeper understanding of the root causes of the climate crisis, such as exploitation of the labor of marginalized people, can help to dispel the myth that climate justice work is a distraction from emissions-lowering action. This attention to historical context parallels insights from Indigenous scholars, many of whom view the climate crisis as a consequence of the same colonial slow violence that has been devastating Indigenous communities for centuries (Baldwin et al., 2018; Whyte, 2020).

Emphasizing the power of coalitional organizing can also help counteract the myth that justice is incompatible with urgency. In response to an interview question about the Sunrise Movement’s coalitional model of organizing, Kanthi framed coalitional organizing as a commonsense solution to the inherently intersectional problem of climate injustice, arguing that white-led environmental movements have lacked the necessary power to address climate change: “The only way to build power is to go to the allies that we have been scoffing at as a movement in the past and instead link arms and realize that every issue we’re fighting for, our theory of oppression, our vision for a better world—puts us all firmly on the same side.” This argument parallels Ana’s point above

about the powerlessness of market solutions: both ask, if your proposed strategy has not worked yet, why should we believe it will work now? By drawing attention to the failures of non-coalitional movements, this strategy frames coalitions as tactically sound as well as morally necessary.

Finally, another barrier to engaging climate activists in creating systemic change is a preoccupation with individual lifestyle habits over collective action, which has been encouraged through marketing that frames climate change as an issue to be solved through environmentally responsible purchasing choices. As one survey respondent observed, “There’s a belief in the power of individual actions like recycling or being vegan that can distract people’s focus from system change.” Environmental health and justice communication expert Christine Cordero described her approach to guiding people already engaged in lifestyle change to broaden their horizons to collective action (10).

(10) I usually have not left any climate conversation without the discussion of “Seventy-something percent of the emissions is by corporations.” And so, trying to put it on individuals—even if all of us did the right thing, this thing would not be solved. At some point I look for that opening in a conversation. So then it’s like, “Hey, it’s so great what you’re doing. That’s awesome that you’re driving less.” [...] And then it’s like, “Oh, what are the other ways to be engaged?” I try to make it really concrete. Like if somebody has something locally that they can get plugged into that’s interesting.

Cordero’s strategies include celebrating the audience’s current efforts towards a more sustainable lifestyle, sharing facts about the amount of carbon emissions produced by corporations versus individuals globally, and offering concrete, local opportunities for the audience to engage in collective action. This approach recognizes and builds on shared values to achieve a conversational goal that could otherwise come across as judgmental.

4.3. Climate justice deniers

A third potential audience for climate justice communication is *climate justice deniers*, or people who reject climate injustice as a historical and present reality and/or do not see climate justice as a necessity. These people may or may not understand the validity of climate science. They are different from climate activists who are not concerned with social justice because they are apathetic to (or even actively opposed to) climate justice, not just uninformed about it.

Several climate justice organizers mentioned that they do not recommend dedicating resources to engaging climate justice deniers at the expense of other audiences. Diamond Spratling, founder and executive director of Millennials for Environmental Justice, recommended against trying to engage apathetic audiences when working with limited resources (11).

(11) I don’t know that I would want all of our resources to go to people like that, because at that point they’re just being negligent or ignorant to it. Like, you know it’s happening, but like, “I don’t care. This doesn’t concern me.” And if you have that type of personality or thought on climate change, then I wouldn’t spend my money or resources or taxes on you to do that. I don’t even know how we would go about reaching that population, or that group, except to tax them or something.

Above, Spratling recommends influencing climate justice deniers through structural solutions such as taxation rather than through direct messaging. Similarly, climate justice consultant and equity activist, Alexis Goggans, commented that apathetic and privileged audiences are best reached by “market signals” (12).

(12) I would *love* for privileged people to wake up and go, “Oh my gosh, I should donate more and use my platform to advocate for oppressed people,” but, I don’t know, have we really seen philanthropists or individuals giving rise to the level of action required? [...] Honestly, I think we just need to tax them, and level the playing field. In my heart of hearts, I would love to appeal to people’s inner humanity. “Oh, we’re human, we’re all equal, I understand my privilege, I’m going to show up ...” But if the pandemic, if wildfires, if landslides, if school shootings, whatever the issue is, hasn’t compelled you to act now, what will? Can we even wait? What would it take? Does an asteroid have to come?

In this excerpt, Goggans expresses pessimism about the payoff of engaging audiences who have not been galvanized by extreme weather events and other disasters. However, she later stressed that it remains important to engage “people who are moved by compassionate appeals,” untangling privilege from apathy.

Alycia Bacon, an organizer with Mothers Out Front, offered advice on how to reach privileged audiences who do not yet feel that they “have a stake in the issue,” but who may be influenced to see how it impacts them. She commented that health can be a useful framing for doing so, recommending messages such as “We are all healthier when our communities are healthy.” Unlike Goggans, she referenced COVID-19 not as an example of people’s apathy, but of their interconnectedness (13).

(13) I am trying to focus on the human aspect, and we are looking for ways to demonstrate how connected we all are. Particularly, one area in town that is by the train tracks has worse air quality than other parts of town, and that is a lower income, predominantly Black community. If you live in a nicer area, you might not care about their air quality. But those people are your service workers, they’re your gas station workers, your grocery store workers. COVID-19 showed how we are all connected. Those are going to be people that might be your waitstaff, or they might be the one handling your groceries, and if those people get sick, they can get you sick. And if they die, then the lines at the grocery store going to be longer, and all these other things are going to be affected by that. I also try to put in consideration of, what kind of society do we want to be? Do we want people just dropping dead everywhere, and that’s okay because it’s not your yard?

Here, Bacon suggests pointing out the cascading effects of the climate crisis at the local level, noting that frontline community members are often service workers who are integral to the everyday infrastructure of the lives of the privileged. Like the strategy of taxation, this tactic appeals to the immediate self-interests of climate justice deniers. Bacon concludes, however, with a moral argument: “What kind of society do we want to be?”

While the above-quoted participants vary in their recommendations for engaging with climate justice deniers, they agree that communicators should carefully consider whether it is worthwhile to reach out to climate justice deniers directly, or if it might be a better use of resources to influence them through policies such as taxation. They differentiate between climate justice deniers and privileged audiences, whom they recommend influencing not only through appeals to their self-interests, but also through moral arguments and appeals to compassion. These findings suggest that, while it is important to evoke empathy from some privileged audiences, whose disproportionate wealth and political power could be useful to climate movements, it is also important to target empathy-based messages only to those who can be persuaded by them. These findings highlight the centrality of audience compassion or apathy as a consideration for target audience selection in climate justice communication.

5. Discussion

U.S. climate activists who participated in this study suggest that the most important audiences to reach with climate justice communication include (1) people who are concerned about social injustice, but not climate justice and (2) people who are concerned about the climate crisis, but not climate justice. These two groups are each already convinced of the importance of one half of the phrase “climate justice” (Figure 1).

Activists recognize frontline community members, in particular, as a key group to engage in climate justice communication, and note the importance of frontline messengers in this work. They do not generally consider climate justice deniers, or people who are apathetic to climate injustice, to be a high priority for outreach.

These results extend previous audience segmentations, which have characterized audiences based on their political affiliation, their level of concern about the climate crisis, and their positionality with respect to frontline communities, by adding a consideration of the degree to which audiences are involved in work adjacent to climate justice. The proposed target audiences—social justice advocates and climate activists—are both persuadable and strategically important. Engaging social

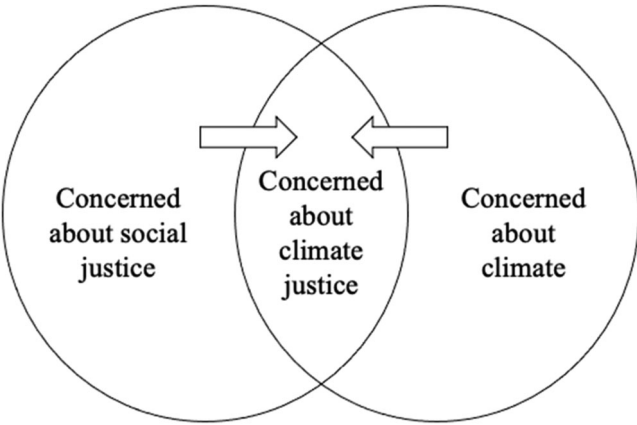


Figure 1. U.S. activists’ recommended audiences for climate justice communication.

justice advocates could help build the broad coalitions necessary for climate action while reinforcing the existing social justice focus of climate movements. Encouraging climate activists to consider justice concerns, meanwhile, could make climate movements more welcoming to marginalized communities and prevent schisms around perceived clashes between justice on the one hand, and pragmatism and urgency on the other.

To reach social justice advocates and climate activists, respectively, U.S. climate organizers recommend the following strategies (Table 2).

Although these sets of strategies are tailored to different audiences, they share a uniting principle of bringing climate justice closer to home: that is, making it more proximal to the audience’s immediate concerns and social networks. They offer two potential resolutions to the problem of decreasing psychological distance while emphasizing climate justice: discussing local examples of inequality (decreasing spatial distance), and encouraging identity-based empathy with impacted people elsewhere (decreasing social distance). These strategies could work in tandem to encourage concern about climate injustice at the local and international scale. In addition, these strategies suggest multi-faceted ways to advocate for structural change, including positive framings (highlighting the co-benefits and political effectiveness of structural climate solutions) and negative ones (criticizing superficial solutions as immoral and ineffective).

Each of the strategies recommended above presents a considerable communicative challenge in its own right and provides the basis for further research. Future studies could examine how activists’ suggested strategies for climate justice communication play out in field experiments such as social media campaigns and deep-canvassing initiatives (see Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2022). Additionally, the proposed categories are broad: further research could more finely

Table 2. U.S. climate organizers’ recommended strategies for climate justice communication.

Audience	U.S. climate organizers’ recommended strategies
Social justice advocates	1. Discuss the intersectional impacts of the climate crisis 2. Highlight intersectional benefits of climate solutions 3. Support frontline climate messengers to do 1) and 2)
Climate advocates	1. Discuss local climate justice issues 2. Promote empathy with people impacted by the climate crisis 3. Advocate for systemic solutions

segment social justice advocates and climate activists into sub-groups. Finally, this study is limited to a broad overview of the U.S. context. More work is needed to understand how practitioner recommendations for climate justice communication vary both within the U.S. and in other contexts in the global climate justice movement, particularly the Global South. Such work will help to guide the emergent field of climate justice communication in directions that reflect the priorities of climate justice, making this research area more useful to climate movements.

Ethics approvals

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the College of Saint Benedict and St. John's University.

Notes

1. See the comment section of Klein's (2021) Breitbart article for more examples of this discourse. <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2021/11/07/black-trees-matter-vp-kamala-harris-asks-nasa-can-track-trees-race-environmental-justice/>
2. This term has been contested through alternative formulations such as (*M*)*anthropocene*, which highlights gendered inequalities (MacGregor, 2019), *Capitalocene*, which names capitalism as a driving force of climate change (Moore, 2017), and *Plantationocene*, which highlights "the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor." (Haraway, 2015, p. 162).
3. Though the recruitment materials and selection process invited "climate justice organizers" to participate, analysis of the data revealed that some participants were only ideologically aligned with, rather substantively involved in, climate justice organizing. For this reason, I focus the analysis on data shared by organizers most clearly active in climate justice work.

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Data availability statement

The interview data associated with this study is available through the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/27FO2A>.

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