

Dr Genevieve Guenther transcript

Genevieve Guenther: I am going to use my approach to climate communication, which merges the psychological and sociological research with renaissance and classical theory as a rhetoric, and how storytelling produces action to suggest certain frames that not only journalists, but storytellers in the media more broadly, might be able to use to help mobilise the concerned into action.

And before I get started, I just want to clarify that I'm going to be talking about communication that is directed to that vast majority of people who are already concerned about the climate crisis, but who have not yet been mobilised to join the climate movement in whatever way feels meaningful for them. I think that it's a much more important task, actually, for thought leaders to try to mobilise those people into action than to try to persuade deniers to accept the science of climate change, or even to sort of get the disengaged to care about the crisis, because I don't think there's any communication that can really overcome the effects of coordinated right-wing media disinformation and right-wing media cues.

And so, having tracked how the language of climate politics play out, I think that the best chance of moving our politics forward is we need to tell the story of climate change, not as a science story, but as a human story. I mean, I think journalists are sort of unthinkingly telling climate change as a human story. But the problem is they're currently representing the climate crisis as a tragedy.

Humanity in this story has a Promethean power to use technology to transcend the limits of nature. But this power has consequences we didn't

imagine. It's causing the twin climate and ecological crises. And so, what we need to do now is wake everybody up and collectively recognise the fatal consequences of our actions. But increasingly, it seems like this recognition is coming too late. Emissions are continuing to rise while the world sleeps, and we're creating off a cliff into the abyss of apocalyptic runaway global heating.

So, the story resonates, right? I mean, even Greta Thunberg talks about needing to wake people up. The story sounds intuitively correct, at least on some level. To my mind, however, I think the story is wrong. Although it is true that most Americans at least don't understand how dangerous climate change will be to the children who are currently growing up right now, and how necessary it is that governments lead the decarbonisation of our economy without any delay. I would actually argue that enough people, and certainly enough people in power, actually do understand these things, and they're not taking adequate action, not because they don't understand or because they haven't recognised or woken up, but because they don't want to lose their access to money or loosen their hold on power. As Bill recently said in his newsletter, which is extremely excellent and to which you all must subscribe:

“Changing the world with climate communication is not actually about raising awareness with data and reason, but encouraging people to engage in a fight over money and power and the genre of story that best does this, according to literary critics and philosophers, stretching all the way back to Aristotle, is the epic.”

So, the epic is a sweeping tale of a hero who bands together with a small group of fighters to overcome life and death challenges and renounce exquisite temptations in order to overthrow a corrupt regime and found a new world. This kind of story also has deep resonances in Western culture. From David, who uses his cunning to topple Goliath, to Aeneas, who tears himself

away from Dido in order to continue his journey towards the founding of Rome, to the band of rebels in Star Wars, who collect a coalition of misfits to topple this evil empire, to the leather and vinyl clad punks in The Matrix, who have unplugged themselves from the system and devoted their lives to taking down the machines, there are copious examples to draw from when you're assembling stories to inspire people to join the fight to end the fossil fuel economy.

Now, I mean, all my examples are American, of course, but the Tolkien books, for example, are also in this genre. So, the epic inspires two big emotions that can help mobilise people into action. The first is outrage, or moral shock, as it's known in the social science literature. And the second is the desire for a new world. I'll talk about these emotions, and then end with a final bit of advice about turning epic storytelling into climate communications practice.

So, first: to help produce outrage and also just to be accurate in the way that we talk about the climate crisis, keep your storytelling focus on people. Too often communicators, journalists, novelists, everybody, represent climate change as a disembodied force that we should fight directly as if we were fighting climate change. But in reality, we must fight the people in power who are supporting the fossil fuel economy and blocking decarbonisation. The climate crisis is not caused by human nature, but by some humans in power. And every epic has its extraordinary villains. And I promise you, once you start talking about the climate crisis as a conflict between people over money and power, you will have no trouble finding villains for your narrative. But to ensure your stories about climate villains really do produce that kind of moral shock and outrage that can mobilise people into action, you also need to make the consequences of what these people are doing as clear and vivid and personal as possible. You need to talk about these things with [unknown], as the Renaissance poets would say, with a kind of electricity and vividness.

So, you could describe having your home repeatedly inundated with water from torrential downpours over and over until the mould seeps in and the foundations start to sag, and you have to move whether you can afford it or not. Or you could describe hunger gnawing at your ribs as you try to sleep, because multiple bread baskets have failed due to high heat and drought, and market shelves have been empty for months on end. Or, as Kim Stanley Robinson does so brilliantly in his novel *The Ministry of the Future*, which Bill alluded to earlier, you could narrate what it feels like to suffer a scorching heat wave that, over the course of the week, kills millions of people, many of whom are slowly cooked to death in a hot lake where they've tried to take refuge.

Stories like these, which enable people to imagine suffering global heating in their own bodies, make clear and visceral the horror of what the people blocking decarbonisation are doing to us and our children. Now these stories are scary, but climate change itself is scary. I mean, when I read scientific studies, I'm very often shot through with bolts of fear.

Now, for many years, climate communicators were told not to scare people, rather to sugarcoat their stories because the social science research seemed to show that fear made people disengage, fall into a kind of doomism, or just sort of turn away. But if you examine the social science research carefully, you'll discover that it's only in isolation that fear is demotivating. When frightening stories are told to people who are already concerned about the crisis. And when those scary stories are paired with messages that bring the people causing the crisis into view, such stories help produce the outrage that mobilises people into action. So, fear is the energy, as it were, and outrage is the machine that metabolises that energy and propels people into action.

But then, of course, the question arises: action towards what? So, part of this epic storytelling will involve laying out a vision of the new decarbonised world

that people can begin to long for quite aside from their longing for pure survival. And arguably this vision has not really emerged yet. We still need to create it. But you know, that's what you're all here for. And the good news is that you don't need to be a futurist to begin to delineate what would be wonderful about a decarbonised world. Anyone who cares about language can help, even just using a slightly different vocabulary can begin to make a decarbonised world visible to the imagination and desirable.

So, for example, many climate communicators try to overcome disinformation or even just people's, you know, legitimate worries about the cost of decarbonisation by citing the even higher costs of not acting on the climate crisis. The strategy, I think, is a missed opportunity to get people actively excited about net zero, but real net zero decarbonisation. Rather, we should turn people's attention away from the pain of spending money, towards the financial benefit of decarbonising. For if you compile the economics research, you'll see that a decarbonised economy will actually make the vast majority of people more prosperous. They'll save literally thousands of dollars a year in electricity, heating, and at least in the US, health care bills, which will raise their real incomes significantly. Now, I know this sounds implausible almost, but that's because the way we have used the word cost to talk about the cost of climate change has normalised the idea that climate action will be felt in the wallet when in reality, the cost of climate action will be socially distributed, while its tremendous benefits will be personal and palpable. So, I will talk about this more in my book, and I'm sort of scooping myself here, but I promise you, I will bring receipts there. I'm just going to lay out the recommendation now.

At any rate, that's what I think solutions journalism should be in the epic frame, not just reports about new technologies that might replace fossil fuels, because I don't really think that most people care about objects and machines.

I think solutions journalism should talk about the parts of decarbonisation that will make most people's lives better, even just in the next decades. Indeed, something devoutly to be wished. And that is the world that people in the climate movement are fighting for. And that is what climate communicators need to talk about.

So, in sum, people in power are putting our children in danger. They are destroying the conditions for the only life in the known universe. And so what we need to do, as people who care about life on this planet, we need to remove those people from power and replace them with climate champions who will lead the transition into a decarbonised world without delay. That will require us to band together collectively, overcome great obstacles, use our cunning and strength to topple mighty adversaries, and drink deeply from our well of love and duty in order to build something beautiful. So, I'm here today to say, when you're talking about climate change, let's also start talking about that beautiful world and help bring it into being.