

# News Media and Climate Politics

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL EFFICACY  
IN A CLIMATE OF RELUCTANT CYNICISM

By Kathleen Cross, Shane Gunster,  
Marcelina Piotrowski & Shannon Daub

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CCPA  
CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
BC Office

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# Summary

**HOW THE NEWS MEDIA COVER CLIMATE CHANGE** has a strong impact on how citizens understand and engage with the issue. In this research we aim to identify ways in which media either create “climate cynicism” or help build more positive public engagement.

We conducted seven focus groups with 53 participants from Metro Vancouver to explore how they understand, feel about and engage with news coverage of climate politics. Participants were selected for high levels of awareness about climate change but relatively low levels of political engagement. According to US public opinion research on climate change conducted by the Yale Project for Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, the general public can be segmented into six groups based on varying levels of climate change awareness, concern and engagement. Our study focused on the two most aware groups: the “alarmed” and “concerned.”

While there was a strong desire for more aggressive political action to address climate change, virtually all expressed considerable skepticism that governments, corporations or their fellow citizens could be convinced of the need to address the problem.

Generally well-informed about the science of climate change and worried about its impacts, these groups are most interested in news and information about actions to mitigate climate change. While they are hopeful about the possibility of collective political action, they are also deeply discouraged by the power that corporate interests seem to exercise over the political process, and the lack of political will to act. Accordingly, we were particularly interested in how news about climate politics shapes their perceptions and feelings of political efficacy – beliefs about their own ability to influence the political process and the responsiveness of government to citizen concerns.

Our study was also informed by Shane Gunster’s review of how BC media covered the failed 2009 Copenhagen summit on climate change. He found that the media coverage tended to highlight the failures of existing economic and political institutions to take action, and he speculated that this was more likely to create cynicism and apathy, as citizens increasingly view climate change as fundamentally irresolvable. On the other hand, Gunster hypothesized that news stories about concrete political successes can strengthen perceptions of political efficacy, giving people a sense that public engagement with climate politics can and does matter.

Our focus groups consisted of a general discussion of news coverage of climate change, a review of selected news stories about climate politics and a final group exercise in which participants were invited to produce their own news story.

The overwhelming initial response of our participants to news about climate politics was cynicism. While there was a strong desire for more aggressive political action to address climate change, virtually all expressed considerable skepticism that governments, corporations or their fellow citizens could be convinced of the need to address the problem. Even more troubling was the tendency of many participants to dismiss collective action and political engagement as irrelevant.

However, we characterize this cynicism as “reluctant” given the strong preference that participants expressed for information and stories about concrete, positive action, and their ongoing desire for positive change. Our participants are eager for a different kind of news about climate politics, and

our discussions with them suggest that there is real potential for news media to produce stories that can counteract cynicism and support effective political engagement.

Our key findings include:

1. **Success stories about climate politics have a positive impact:** When participants read such stories, they were eager to learn more, and their perspectives shifted to become more optimistic.
2. **People are especially excited by stories of entrepreneurial activism and everyday heroism**—that is, tales of people who, through their own initiative and creativity, open up new spaces for political engagement for themselves and others. These stories provide concrete examples of the connection between individual and collective action. In the absence of this connection, desire for action can default to more familiar but limited ideas of individualized behaviour change (recycling, reducing energy consumption, etc).
3. **As people increase their awareness and understanding of political successes, they are more likely to contradict others' cynicism** by bringing up these success stories. This is a strong argument for giving such stories a more prominent place in the mix of news about climate politics.
4. **People engage more strongly with localized information** about the causes and consequences of climate change, as well as solutions. Such examples make it easier to identify with and understand the issue.
5. **Descriptive communication is more powerful than prescriptive:** Moral injunctions to “get active” in climate politics are a common feature of environmental communication, and they may have some positive impact. But they also risk increasing feelings of guilt and frustration. On the other hand, news that provides compelling stories about the experiences of people who already participate in climate politics—including not only why they are active but also how that experience affects them—can provide a much easier point of entry into political engagement. People come to understand different forms of democratic engagement as normal activities that people just like them are doing (and enjoying).
6. **Information about how to engage politically, and the effects of political engagement, is just as important as information about climate change science.** While our participants were reasonably well informed about the science of climate change and about national and international climate politics, they had much less understanding of individual and collective political agency. News media could provide more stories about how a single political action by an individual (e.g. voting, joining an organization, participating in a campaign) can, together with the single actions of other individuals, create a collective political force with transformative consequences.

News that provides compelling stories about the experiences of people who already participate in climate politics—including not only why they are active but also how that experience affects them—can provide a much easier point of entry into political engagement.

It is often said that society is at a crossroads of climate change, and that is particularly true for how journalism will choose to represent climate politics in the future. News media can continue to direct a narrow spotlight upon the failures of governments, political elites and international negotiations. But to capture the full story of climate change, reports of failure could instead be juxtaposed with some of the countless ways in which individuals are coming together in new forms of solidarity, community and action. The path that is chosen may well have a critical impact upon how and if people who are already concerned and alarmed join with their fellow citizens and become active participants in, rather than helpless observers of, the politics of climate change.

# Introduction

This study aims to better understand how news about climate politics shapes the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of news consumers, in particular their engagement with climate change as a political issue.

NEWS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE PLAYS A MAJOR ROLE in shaping how citizens understand, feel and engage with it as a social, economic and political issue. Considerable concern has been expressed about the tendency of some news media to inaccurately represent the science of climate change, giving the views of a handful of “skeptics” far more attention than they deserve as compared to the broad scientific consensus around the human causes and negative impacts of global warming. There has been much less focus, however, on how the portrayal of climate politics and policies affects public engagement with the issue. Such representations are especially important for those members of the public who are both aware and concerned about climate change but who are also unsure (or skeptical) about their own capacity to take meaningful action or the ability and willingness of governments to address the problem. Further, most studies that investigate media portrayals of climate change rely on content and/or discourse analyses, which while highly valuable are also inherently speculative as to how these portrayals actually influence audiences.

This study aims to better understand how news about climate politics shapes the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of news consumers, in particular their engagement with climate change as a political issue. We report on findings from participatory focus group interviews conducted with Metro Vancouver residents who identify themselves as concerned about climate change.

We begin with a review in Part 2 of key research that shaped our approach — the Six Americas public opinion study conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication<sup>1</sup>, and earlier content and discourse analysis of BC media coverage of climate change politics conducted by team member Shane Gunster.<sup>2</sup> Part 3 provides a detailed overview of how the group interviews were designed and conducted. The remaining sections report on our key findings, including trigger points for climate cynicism, paths to political engagement and efficacy, and our conclusions about how news media (and other news producers such as social movement groups) can help build more positive public engagement with climate action and solutions.

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1 Leiserowitz et al. 2011, 2012.

2 Gunster 2011, 2012.

# Background

OUR WORK WAS CARRIED OUT as part of the Climate Justice Project (CJP), a research and public engagement effort that brings a multidisciplinary team of academics together with environmental organizations, First Nations, social justice groups, labour unions and other research institutes. The CJP's broad focus is to develop climate policies that can dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions while also enhancing social justice. The CJP's work has included tackling the question of how communication and mobilization efforts can be more effective, so that we can break the apparent climate mobilization paradox — that is, relatively high levels of public concern about climate change that (largely, at least to date) fail to translate into strong demand for systemic or policy-based climate solutions.

Two premises underlie our approach to studying people's engagement with news and climate politics:

- The most important audience for news about climate politics is people who are already aware and concerned about climate change and who therefore have the greatest potential to become politically mobilized.
- Effective communication about climate politics, rather than climate science or lifestyle change, is the key to public political mobilization around climate change.

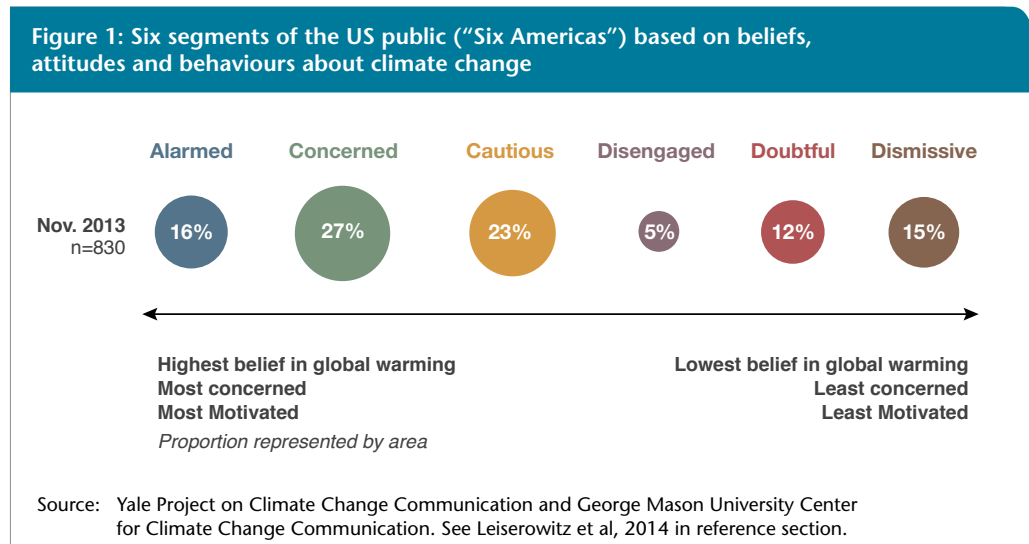
Effective communication about climate politics, rather than climate science or lifestyle change, is the key to public political mobilization around climate change.

## ENGAGING PUBLICS

Since 2008, the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication has conducted extensive opinion surveys of the American public about climate change. Their research, published in the report *Global Warming's Six Americas*, finds that the general public can be divided into six distinct publics, each responding to climate change in very different ways based on varying levels of

awareness, concern and engagement. These publics range from the alarmed to the dismissive (Figure 1). While the *Six Americas* framework has not been applied to Canada, we believe that the distribution of the Canadian public among these segments is likely broadly similar and that this continuum of belief, concern and motivation provides a useful tool for distinguishing between different clusters of opinion on climate change.

Good climate change communication, note the Yale researchers, must take into account the different perspectives, values and beliefs held by each of these publics. “Messages are unlikely to be effective if a diverse population is treated as a homogenous mass, ignoring the diversity of opinion, the cultural and political underpinnings of these opinions, and the informational needs and interests of sub-groups within the population.”<sup>3</sup>



With high levels of interest and concern about climate change, and a strong desire for action, the “alarmed” and the “concerned” segments are the most important constituency for political mobilization in support of stronger policies and government action.

With high levels of interest and concern about climate change, and a strong desire for action, the alarmed and the concerned segments are the most important constituency for political mobilization in support of stronger policies and government action.

- The alarmed are certain that global warming is happening, believe that people (including those in the United States) are currently being harmed by it and worry that their families and future generations are at risk. Three-quarters of this segment see climate change as potentially solvable. Close to two-thirds report having thought “a lot” about global warming; 80 per cent follow environmental news (compared to the national average of 38 per cent), and 55 per cent report paying “a lot” of attention to news stories about global warming (more than four times the level of any other segment).<sup>4</sup>
- Levels of involvement for the concerned are not as high as the alarmed, but they are significantly higher than all other segments. A substantial majority sees global warming as a risk to their families and future generations, and more than two-thirds see climate change as a problem that humans could solve. Three-quarters pay at least “some” attention to information about global warming, though a much smaller proportion (18 per cent) than the alarmed pay “a lot” of attention.<sup>5</sup>

3 Roser-Renouf et al. 2014:1.

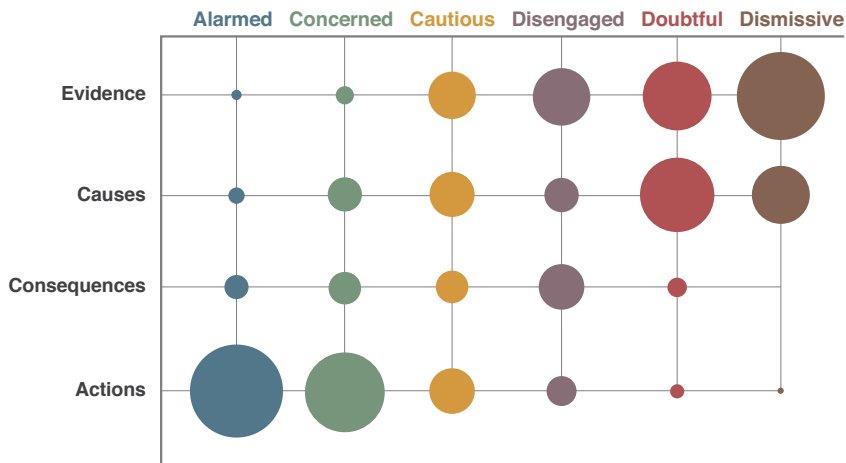
4 Ibid., 7–9.

5 Roser-Renouf et al. 2014:9–11.



Broadly speaking, the provision of more information about climate science is unlikely to have much impact on these groups because they are already convinced of the reality, danger and human-caused nature of climate change. Instead, they have a much healthier appetite for news about the *solutions* to climate change. As Figure 2 illustrates, when asked what question they would most like to pose to an expert on climate change, both the alarmed and the concerned overwhelmingly prioritized information about action and, in particular, information about what *governments* can do.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Nature of the one question Americans would most like to pose to a climate scientist



Source: Engaging diverse audiences with climate change: Message strategies for Global Warming's Six Americas. See Roser-Renouf et al, 2015 in reference section.

If significant proportions of these publics were to become politically engaged, they could have a transformative impact upon climate politics and open up the possibility for far more aggressive climate policies and actions.

“The challenge with the high involvement segments,” conclude the Yale researchers, “is *motivating them to take action, particularly political action and opinion leadership*: Even among the alarmed, *political actions are not the norm*.”<sup>7</sup> Both groups have “high levels of concern about climate change, but lower levels of efficacy with regard to solving it; hence, communicators may wish to focus on *building efficacy* to complement the groups’ high risk perceptions to motivate them to take action.”<sup>8</sup> Only about one-quarter of the alarmed, for example, have engaged in political activism.<sup>9</sup> If, however, significant proportions of these publics were to become politically engaged, they could have a transformative impact upon climate politics and open up the possibility for far more aggressive climate policies and actions.

On the one hand, both segments clearly possess a strong belief in the potential of collective political action to shape climate and energy policies. More than half of the alarmed, for example, “strongly agreed” with the statement “If people who share my views on global warming work together, we can influence the decisions of our elected representatives,” with 95 per cent overall agreement with this claim. The level of strong agreement was lower among the concerned, but their overall agreement (89 per cent) with this statement was also very high, with both groups having much stronger beliefs in this regard than all the other segments.<sup>10</sup>

6 Leiserowitz et al. 2011:15.

7 Roser-Renouf et al. 2014:1; emphasis added.

8 Ibid., 12; emphasis added.

9 Leiserowitz et al. 2013:5.

10 Leiserowitz et al. 2013:26–28.

There is great optimism, in other words, about the transformative *possibilities* of political engagement.

The *realities* of our political landscape, on the other hand, are far more sobering, with both groups reporting deep pessimism about their *actual* political efficacy. Asked to rank the levels of political influence of 10 different groups, both segments identified “people who share my views on global warming” as having the *lowest* impact of all groups, with less than 15 per cent agreeing that people like themselves have “a lot” of political influence. Conversely, “large campaign contributors” and “coal, oil and natural gas companies” were identified as the most powerful constituencies, with 75 per cent of the alarmed and close to 60 per cent of the concerned identifying them as possessing “a lot” of influence.<sup>11</sup>

While prospectively hopeful about the possibilities of political activism, then, both the alarmed and the concerned are deeply discouraged by the power that corporate interests seem to exercise over the political process.

## NEWS AND CLIMATE POLITICS

Media attention to climate change is often at its most intense (and most memorable) during episodic political events such as election campaigns, policy debates and multilateral negotiations.

Mediating this gap between speculative optimism and dispiriting pessimism — what Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci famously described as “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” — are news media and, more specifically, the representations of climate politics they provide. As communications scholar Anabela Carvalho puts it:

[T]he media are the main arenas for citizens’ understanding of political struggles in our times.... perceptions of [the] distribution of power, of the role of individuals in democracy and of the effectiveness of civic action are a function of multiple discursive representations.... [M]edia(ted) discourses also influence people’s view of their own position in the chessboard of politics and are also constitutive of the political self, cultivating dispositions to action or inaction.<sup>12</sup>

Given their keen interest in information about climate change, the alarmed and the concerned are likely to be especially acute observers of news about the political dimensions of climate change, including action (or inaction) by government, campaigns and struggles within civil society and the efficacy (or impotence) of climate activism. Such coverage is especially influential in shaping how these groups conceptualize political engagement and activism.

Critical analysis of news about climate change has tended to focus on deficiencies in media accounts of climate science, especially the tendency of mainstream media to portray so-called skepticism about climate change as credible or newsworthy.<sup>13</sup> However, media attention to climate change is often at its most intense (and most memorable) during episodic political events such as election campaigns, policy debates and multilateral negotiations.<sup>14</sup> Increased levels of coverage during these periods can establish dominant frames of cognition and affect, which have long-lasting impacts on how individuals think and feel about climate change — especially for those predisposed to pay close attention.

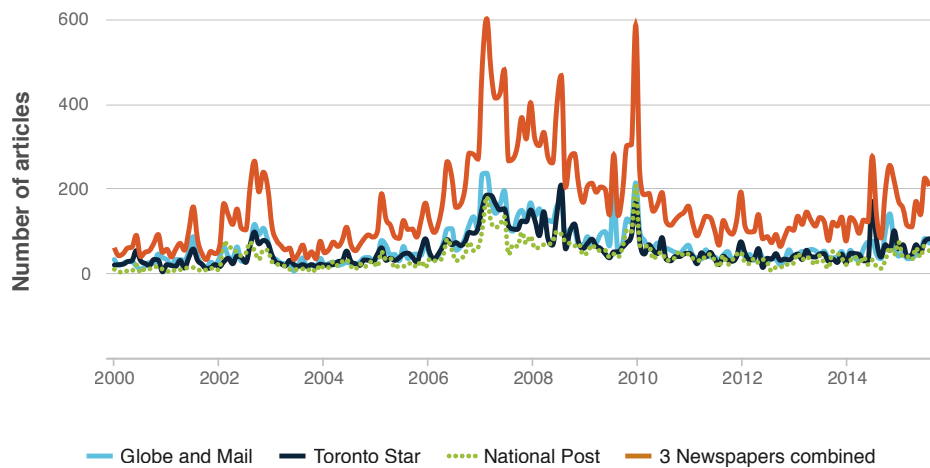
11 Ibid.

12 Carvalho 2010:174.

13 See for example Antilla 2005 and Boykoff and Boykoff 2004.

14 Schäfer et al. 2014.

Figure 3: 2000-2015 Canadian newspaper coverage of climate change or global warming



Source: CIRES Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado Boulder, [http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/media\\_coverage/canada](http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/media_coverage/canada). See Wang et al, 2015 in the reference section.

As Figure 3 suggests, there have been two periods over the last decade in which climate change received sustained attention in Canadian news. From February 2007 to July 2008, the focus was balanced between climate science — including the release of three high-profile reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and political events such as the federal Liberal proposal for a carbon tax, which dominated the summer 2008 federal election campaign — and the BC government’s well-publicized implementation of a provincial carbon tax in July 2008.

By December 2009, the media spotlight had shifted almost exclusively to climate politics as global leaders met in Copenhagen for negotiations that were widely billed as the last chance to save the planet from catastrophic climate change. The talks were a spectacular failure, ending in acrimony and bitter disappointment. And, as the graph shows, the Copenhagen summit was the last time that news media devoted significant attention to climate change. Levels of coverage plummeted after December 2009 and have remained comparatively low ever since (even as warnings from the scientific community, as well as institutions such as the World Bank, the International Energy Agency and PricewaterhouseCoopers have become ever more urgent).

In one of the few studies to focus on the intersection of news media and climate politics, Shane Gunster conducted a comprehensive review of how BC media covered the Copenhagen summit for the Climate Justice Project.<sup>15</sup> He analyzed all news about climate change that appeared in eight different provincial news sources (daily newspapers, television newscasts, talk radio programs and alternative media) over a three-week period before, during and after the summit. We review his key findings in detail here, as they significantly informed our study.

- Climate politics was the principal focus of coverage during the review period (the primary subject of 73 per cent of all items), as distinct from climate science (18 per cent)

<sup>15</sup> Gunster 2011.

The Copenhagen summit was the last time that news media devoted significant attention to climate change. Levels of coverage plummeted after December 2009 and have remained comparatively low ever since

or individual behavioural change (3.2 per cent). Discussion of the need for political solutions was also a prominent feature of the coverage, appearing with much greater frequency than mentions of technological solutions or voluntary actions by individuals and businesses.

- Arguments in favour of political solutions were predominantly framed around the need to avoid the adverse impacts of climate change. More positive framing of environmental initiatives as enabling a green economy/green jobs was comparatively rare.
- Opposition to climate action was primarily rooted in an economy/jobs vs. environment frame that emphasized the economic damage/risks such action could have upon Canada. Aside from a handful of columns, op-eds and calls to talk radio, skepticism about climate science did not play a major role in coverage and was not frequently invoked to justify delay or inaction.
- Largely positive (but abstract) representations of political action as necessary and desirable were counterbalanced with thoroughly pessimistic (and concrete) accounts of the inability and/or refusal of governments (and multilateral processes such as the UN negotiations) to implement them. Criticism, frustration and disappointment with the Canadian government's stark failure to address climate change were the most consistent themes throughout all media coverage.
- The failure(s) of climate politics were broadly framed as inevitable — an unavoidable consequence of governments' single-minded pursuit of their national self-interests (to maximize economic growth) and the improbability that (middle-class) publics would ever agree to sacrifice fossil-fuel intensive lifestyles. Virtually no attention was given to the effects of successful climate policies in other jurisdictions, and minimal analysis was provided of the possibility (and benefits) of introducing similar climate-friendly policies and programs in Canada.
- In contrast, alternative media provided a much broader and more optimistic account of climate politics, which included profiling effective climate policies and actions that have had measurable impacts on emissions, showcasing the willingness and desire of many citizens to trade hyper-consumerism for the benefits of more sustainable communities and lifestyles and foregrounding the experiences of "ordinary" people who are engaged in political activism to force their governments to be more responsive to popular concern about climate change.

When climate politics and policies are portrayed as the exclusive domain of national and global elites, little space is left for individuals to engage as anything but cynical and apathetic spectators.

Concluding his study, Gunster speculated that news about climate politics, not climate science, likely has far greater impact on how people think, feel and act with respect to climate change. When climate politics and policies are portrayed as the exclusive domain of national and global elites, little space is left for individuals to engage as anything but cynical and apathetic spectators. Persistent and one-dimensional emphasis upon the *failures* of existing economic and political institutions ultimately frames the totality of climate politics as nothing more than a futile and hopeless exercise, and it positions climate change as fundamentally *irresolvable*. "Denial, indifference, and pessimism," Gunster writes, "these are as much the symptoms of our anemic political culture as our scientific literacy. Indeed, the real crisis may not be that some deny the reality of climate change, but rather that most of us have accepted the 'reality' that politics and existing political institutions have no answer to this problem."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gunster 2011:498.

On the other hand, we hypothesized that news that provides success stories about how specific policies and programs have led to the development of renewable energy, expanded transit, more sustainable communities or some other tangible effect can strengthen a more general perception that public engagement with climate politics can and does matter. As Gunster observed in a companion study analyzing a year's worth of BC alternative media coverage of climate change, *success stories*

...challenge the sclerotic, hidebound and thoroughly cynical visions of [climate] politics by reminding the public that...another world is possible. Governments *can* implement more active climate policies, not simply because they should, but because other governments are implementing (and benefitting) from such policies already; more importantly, citizens can become (more) active in climate politics not simply because they should, but because thousands — *millions* — of others like them are active in countless different ways.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, in another research paper for the Climate Justice Project, this one exploring the future of climate journalism, Bob Hackett, Sara Wylie and Pinar Gurleyen call for prioritizing political (rather than strictly scientific) frames that emphasize mobilization and engagement rather than simply the provision of information. "If climate change is a *political* issue," they write, "a *democratic* perspective highlights opportunities for popular agency, engagement within various local and global sites, and the development of popular political efficacy."<sup>18</sup> Above all, they identify *climate justice* as an emerging collective action frame that "combines the need for urgent action with the promotion of the rights and voices of ordinary people affected by climate change."<sup>19</sup>

In short, this research suggests that the primary barriers to public engagement with climate change are not scientific illiteracy or a lack of information: instead, the problem lies in how so many people perceive, understand and experience themselves as profoundly alienated from the political structures and institutions that appear to govern our collective response to this problem. Foregrounding political themes of democracy, justice and equality can challenge apathy and indifference, and mapping the political topography of *already existing* forms of civic engagement and climate activism can help awaken the public to the many forms of political agency that lie within its reach but which it has yet to grasp.

The primary barriers to public engagement with climate change are not scientific illiteracy or a lack of information: instead, the problem lies in how so many people perceive, understand and experience themselves as profoundly alienated from the political structures and institutions that appear to govern our collective response to this problem.

17 Gunster 2012:272.

18 Hackett, Wylie and Gurleyen 2013:9.

19 Ibid., 2.

# Method

## OBJECTIVES

**OUR GOAL IN THIS STUDY WAS TO DISCOVER** how media practices and media content affect public opinion about climate change and the possibilities for citizen engagement. For the purposes of this study, we define media broadly to include both mainstream and “alternative” media (the latter encompassing non-traditional or non-corporate media organizations and social movement-generated media).

We wanted to better understand how news about climate politics affects levels of political efficacy among our participants.

There is, of course, a broad range of activities that could be described as “engagement” with climate change. Irene Lorenzoni, Sophie Nicholson-Cole and Lorraine Whitmarsh define engagement as “a personal *state* of connection with the issue of climate change,” noting that “it is not enough for people to know about climate change in order to be engaged; they also need to care about it, be motivated and able to take action.”<sup>20</sup> While we wanted to explore the views of our participants about how they define “engagement” our primary interests were the conceptions, attitudes, motivation and disposition of our participants towards *political actions* intended to both influence specific government policies, programs, regulations and actions and *democratize* the structures and processes through which societies make decisions about climate change and ensure that those decisions are equitable, fair and just for all members of society.

Put another way, we wanted to better understand how news about climate politics affects levels of political efficacy among our participants. Political efficacy has two components: internal efficacy (beliefs about one’s own ability to influence the political process) and external efficacy (beliefs about the responsiveness of government to the concerns of citizens).<sup>21</sup> Our research

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<sup>20</sup> Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole and Whitmarsh 2007:446.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson 2010:63.

team hypothesized that, as one's awareness of the magnitude, scale and urgency of the risks posed by climate change grows, belief in the efficacy of individual actions — changing one's lifestyle or consumption patterns — would necessarily grow weaker. As such, climate change increasingly presents itself as a problem that will either be solved through political means or not at all. Consequently, we believe that perceptions of *political* efficacy have become the dominant factor shaping how the alarmed and the concerned engage with climate change. Enhancing our understanding of how news media can both invigorate and repress political efficacy — especially among those with the greatest capacity to develop it — has become an essential task.

## SAMPLE AND RECRUITMENT

We conducted seven group interviews with a total of 53 residents of Metro Vancouver in the fall of 2013. Participants in six of the seven groups were recruited by telephone through a recruitment company. They had a diverse demographic profile (age, gender, income) and an interest in accessing environmental information through a variety of media sources. We directly recruited participants for the seventh group, using a variety of social media to attract participants who regularly consume alternative news media produced in the Metro Vancouver region.

A pre-screening survey was used to select participants who fit the profile of the “alarmed” and “concerned” population segments, as defined by the *Six Americas* study, with low to moderate levels of engagement with climate action (broadly defined). Potential participants were asked to rank their level of concern about climate change on a scale of 1 (not at all concerned) to 10 (extremely concerned). Only those who indicated 5 or above were selected, and most participants reported their level of concern at 7 or 8. Potential participants were also asked about their level and type of engagement in activities connected to climate politics in order to screen in those who were low to medium levels of engagement. Ten possibilities included very low-engagement actions such as “talking to friends and family” and ranged to much higher-engagement actions such as “contacting a local politician.” We selected participants who reported participating in from two to eight of these actions (with most at the lower end of this spectrum).

We designed the interviews to be highly participatory, in order to elicit the reactions, opinions and conversations typically encouraged in focus group interviews as well as the more thoughtful processes required when people are asked to undertake a task and make decisions collaboratively.

## FOCUS GROUP DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

We chose group interviews because their interactive nature allowed us to explore the ways participants together negotiated their responses to the questions and materials we presented them with. Group interviews also reduce pressure on the participants, compared to a one-on-one interview, which is especially important when discussing complex or abstract issues such as political engagement and public policy. We designed the interviews to be highly participatory, in order to elicit the reactions, opinions and conversations typically encouraged in focus group interviews as well as the more thoughtful processes required when people are asked to undertake a task and make decisions collaboratively. We also used a creative collaborative exercise to increase social interaction among the participants.

Each interview included six to eight individuals and consisted of a moderated discussion of climate politics using three different structured activities:

- Open discussion of climate change: Following a brief round of introductions, participants were invited to share their thoughts and feelings about climate change and engage each other in a discussion of the topic.
- Review and discussion of news about climate politics: Participants read and discussed four news items that each focused upon a different dimension of climate politics: local climate policy, international climate negotiations, local political activism and global collective action. The objective of this exercise was to explore participant reactions to different ways of framing climate politics.

The first two items, which were read and discussed as a pair, emphasized existing political institutions and processes.

- The first article, entitled “FAQs: UN Climate Change Conference in Durban,” presented an overview of the purpose and participants of annual global climate negotiations and described Canada’s position at the conference.
- The second article, entitled “BC Carbon Tax cut fuel use, didn’t hurt economy,” reported that the provincial carbon tax had been successful in reducing carbon emissions in British Columbia without compromising economic performance, thereby challenging the conventional “economy vs. environment” framing of climate policy.

The second two items, which were read and discussed together after the first set, described examples of climate activism that explicitly challenged governments on climate change.

- The third article, entitled “Kevin Washbrook makes coal a burning issue,” was a profile of a local anti-coal activist and his campaign to mobilize local communities to resist the expansion of coal export facilities in Vancouver.
- The fourth item, entitled “Climate Demonstrations,” was a feature story by 350.org about a co-ordinated series of climate actions by 350.org in different countries around the world, designed to showcase increasing levels of global awareness and concern about emissions growth and climate change.

For both sets of items, participants were asked to reflect on their reactions to each article at both affective and cognitive levels (e.g. how they felt when reading them, what was most interesting, what in particular they liked and didn’t like about them) and to discuss which article they thought would be more effective in motivating other people to care about climate change and feel they could be part of the solution. Participants were invited to use highlighters and pens to mark up the articles or make notes.

- Self-guided news creation exercise: The final activity involved participants working together in two groups to develop their own news story about climate change. Participants were given a large and diverse collection of text, images and headlines to use as building blocks for their story, along with scissors, tape and a paper display board. They were explicitly asked to construct a story they thought could “help other people get involved in solutions or efforts that are bigger than any one person — things beyond green behaviour changes” such as those highlighted in the second group of articles. This exercise allowed for higher levels of creative and collaborative engagement between the participants and enabled the researchers to determine if dominant news



frames are unconsciously recreated or undermined in the process.<sup>22</sup> After constructing their stories, participants reconvened for a final discussion about the relationship between news, climate politics and civic engagement.

All the focus group interviews were transcribed. Data were analyzed using NVivo software to identify themes and categories as well as through qualitative critical discourse analysis.

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Kitzinger 1994 and 1999.

# Engagement and efficacy in a climate of reluctant cynicism

*I've grown quite cynical and jaded over time, and it just makes me sad to think about climate change and I don't think anything's happening. — Group 1*

Virtually all of our participants expressed considerable skepticism that governments, corporations or even significant numbers of their fellow citizens could (ever) be convinced of the need to address the problem (or even recognize its severity).

**THE OVERWHELMING RESPONSE OF OUR PARTICIPANTS** to news about climate politics was cynicism. While there was a strong desire for more aggressive political action to address climate change, virtually all of our participants expressed considerable skepticism that governments, corporations or even significant numbers of their fellow citizens could (ever) be convinced of the need to address the problem (or even recognize its severity). Even more troubling was the tendency of many participants to dismiss collective action and political engagement as irrelevant given their perceptions of the seemingly insurmountable barriers to social, economic and political change. This cynical disposition to climate politics was thoroughly normalized during our discussions and simply accepted by most as an obvious, natural and “common sense” approach to thinking and talking about climate change. Evidence, anecdotes and arguments in favour of a cynical position came quickly and easily to most, were frequently affirmed by others and were almost never challenged or questioned. On the contrary, making the case for political activism and engagement appeared more difficult for most participants and did not occur easily or frequently during the discussion.

The defining qualities of cynicism are thoughts and feelings of distrust, contempt or pessimism directed towards specific objects. With respect to climate politics, we identified three of the most pervasive “trigger points,” areas that attracted such thoughts and feelings from our participants: politics, policy and government; other people; and political activism. The origins, character and intensity of each trigger point are distinct and are discussed in Part 5.

We have the ability, we just don't take action. We're apathetic....We just don't do anything together about it. But I think we have the ability if we actually started now, to work on it. — Group 5

However, we also believe it is essential to qualify the cynicism that we observed as *reluctant cynicism* given the strong concern participants expressed about climate change as a problem and their desire for positive change. While participants largely accepted their cynical stance as justified and “realistic,” they were also clearly unhappy with it, framing it as a belief system that had been forced upon them and to which they had become resigned. But they were loath to give up hope entirely, leaving their cynicism open, unfinished and reluctant in nature. And this reluctance suggests that countervailing evidence of successful forms of climate politics could be quite persuasive. Indeed, our discussions also provided evidence of a powerful (though largely incipient) desire for more hopeful narratives about climate politics. Inspired by news and discussion about political activism, much more optimistic perspectives about politics burst into visibility in the focus groups, temporarily shattering the pall of cynicism.

In the following sections we review in detail the trigger points for climate cynicism and outline our thoughts and recommendations on the role that news can and should play in shifting perceptions about the value of political engagement.

# Trigger points for climate cynicism

## “HELPLESS, HOPELESS AND FRUSTRATED”: CYNICISM ABOUT POLITICS, POLICY & GOVERNMENT

PARTICIPANTS IN ALL FOCUS GROUPS WERE HIGHLY SKEPTICAL of conventional forms of climate politics and expressed serious doubts about the efficacy of processes such as the UN climate negotiations and even policies such as the BC carbon tax. They had an exceptionally strong and uniformly negative response to the news item about the 2012 Durban summit, expressing deep levels of pessimism and distrust for a seemingly endless Sisyphean process that never produces results.

Every time there's a conference at the UN. It's the same with the carbon tax, they must discuss this almost monthly. You know when some broadcast or news or the government's doing this, that and the other. Whatever. They never do anything. Politically, I mean it doesn't matter what country it is. You just hear the same stuff, over and over again. It takes them forever to make a decision. You end up with the same government or a worse government or whatever.... It is the same, they continually talk about this stuff and never do anything. — Group 6

Sentiments such as these were common to all of the discussion groups. The UN story, for example, was not merely dismissed as boring or irrelevant; instead, reading it actually served as a kind of *anti-political* or *depoliticizing ritual* for our participants, amplifying and intensifying their feelings of alienation and frustration. Several participants described deliberately avoiding stories such as these in their daily lives given the unpleasant emotions they aroused.

All the international discussions and all the different agreements, I just totally tuned out, because to me it's so frustrating. I know that nothing ever gets accomplished. — Group 1

One group used the story to talk about how the theme of political failure (by governments and political elites) is ultimately toxic for public engagement.

Participant 1: When you see something along the lines of “The UN is having trouble coming to a conclusion” because [there are] 180 countries with conflicting priorities, nobody's really taking it that seriously, and it doesn't provide me any motivation to do anything whatsoever. It's just, it's depressing. Great, what next?

Participant 2: Yeah, like, if your government doesn't want to do anything, then it's like, “Why should I?” — Group 4

Others likewise identified the dangers of mutually reinforcing spirals of cynicism that can bind governments, politicians and citizens together into cycles of inaction:

We put the decisions in people who don't care, and all we do is sit back and don't care as well. I think we've kind of gone past the point of no return where most people feel like there is nothing we can do about it and even if there was, there's nobody in a position of power that will do anything about it. — Group 5

Several participants keyed in on media coverage as compounding this dynamic:

It's these kinds of articles [the first set] that don't make [climate change] accessible and don't make it an issue for most people that they feel they can do something about it. It just feels like there are a bunch of people that are in power, and policy and bureaucracy can make all these decisions, and we get articles like this that just tell us about this stuff, but then nothing calls you to action about how you can do anything about it.... The information and the problems move me, but then what am I to do about it? I feel helpless. I feel like I am stuck in a position where all the decisions are being made by the government and politicians, and what can I do about it? Yeah, you can write letters and do all of that sort of stuff, but I don't feel like these kind of articles encourage me to get involved and make it an issue that I can do anything about. — Group 5

Absent credible reporting about real, practical political alternatives, news reports about political failure, elite corruption and institutional gridlock are unlikely to do anything other than augment feelings of frustration, disgust and apathy.

One of the most interesting but also troubling findings of our research was how the predisposition to political cynicism led many participants to dismiss the BC carbon tax story. The piece provided evidence that the tax had been effective in modestly reducing emissions without reducing economic growth; storylines of policy success are all too rare in news about climate politics, and we expected it would generate a positive reaction. Surprisingly, however, a clear majority of participants simply refused to accept the research described in the piece, criticizing it as simplistic and biased:

The article didn't do anything for me...because I instantly became cynical. — Group 1

I don't think [emissions reduction in BC] is necessarily directly related to the carbon tax, like the article made it seem to be. — Group 2

Absent credible reporting about real, practical political alternatives, news reports about political failure, elite corruption and institutional gridlock are unlikely to do anything other than augment feelings of frustration, disgust and apathy.

I see the evidence that they've got a carbon tax and the economy did well, but I don't believe the carbon tax caused the economy to do well. — Group 4

I guess the [carbon tax article] just seemed too good to be true. It was nice, like, we are doing a really great job, aren't we. It made me feel like we should continue, even if the numbers are totally fake [group laughter]. — Group 5

Instead, many defaulted to a populist (and ideologically conservative) rejection of carbon taxes as inefficient, punitive and unfair.

However, this “knee-jerk” skepticism of the tax and refusal to accept research justifying its efficacy should not be interpreted as evidence of the futility of this type of story. To the contrary, it speaks to the need for more substantive coverage of this type, which provides evidence-based assessment of climate policies such as carbon taxes. Increasing levels of such coverage would make it far more difficult to instinctively dismiss such evidence as false or biased. Most members of one of the focus groups, for example, did accept the validity of the story, and their reaction to it was far more positive.

Participant 1: [The carbon tax story] makes it seem really positive, and like we actually have a chance to turn things around.... Whereas [the UN story] is just so doom and gloom, it's like “Oh, we're just screwed now.” I think how the carbon tax article is written, it makes you think in different ways. Like, yes, start supporting sustainable businesses, start shopping local organic food and products. It gives you a different mindset. Whereas [the UN story] puts it in such a global scale that whatever we do here doesn't really matter.

Participant 2: Yeah...the carbon tax one makes me feel like, “Oh, there's a glimmer of hope,” a little bit more optimistic. [The UN story] makes me feel helpless, hopeless and frustrated. — Group 3

### “NOBODY REALLY GIVES A CRAP”: CYNICISM ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND “THE PUBLIC”

One of our participants shared a story about her son's experience working to promote awareness of environmental issues as part of a campaign to educate the public about the benefits of retrofitting homes to improve energy efficiency. She described her frustration and disappointment at the failure of her son and his friends to attract any interest from members of the public in a local mall.

Participant 1: I was...standing there, shaking my head at this huge display that they had, and not one person came up to their little display show...it was really frustrating for him because they were such a small group of teens, and I tell you they gave it one heck of a whirl, but...

Participant 2: So they end up getting very cynical and disappointed. They think the rest of us don't want their services.

Participant 3: We don't care.

Participant 4: Yeah.

Virtually all of our focus groups featured similar discussions lamenting the apparent indifference and apathy of the general public to environmental issues such as climate change.

Participant 1: And after about six months, he says, “Why the hell are we doing this because nobody really gives a crap.” — Group 1

Virtually all of our focus groups featured similar discussions lamenting the apparent indifference and apathy of the general public to environmental issues such as climate change. While criticisms of government and politicians were more focused and direct in response to the news items, cynical depictions of (other) “people” and the general public were equally pervasive, frequently invoked by participants to justify their own cynicism and accepted without comment by others. Such assessments were almost never grounded in evidence about public opinion but instead were expressed and confirmed in the form of illustrative anecdotes and aphorisms, constituting a kind of “common sense” about the seeming apathy of the majority with respect to climate change.

People want to see on the news...what they saw in those gossip magazines.... The ones that bring in the views are the Miley Cyrus videos on MTV. — Group 1

A lot of people have the mentality of “Well, she’s going to recycle, so why should I? I mean, she’s doing it anyway, she’s doing it for both of us, so why the hell should I?” — Group 1

Unfortunately, in today’s society, we are a world of complainers and don’t actually do anything or take action. — Group 2

[Climate change] doesn’t seem immediate, I guess, so it’s not something that is pressing, and therefore the media won’t write about it and favour either side, because people are on the fence about everything. It’s not something that people want to act on. They want to deal with, you know, taxes. — Group 5

For our participants, public apathy, indifference and hostility to climate action could be traced to a variety of different factors, including: manipulation of the public by commercial media, corporate public relations and advertising; people’s preference for the soporific pleasures of consumer society and commercial culture; an inability (or refusal) to grapple with the complexities of politics, science or economics; lack of free time or adequate resources to engage in sustainability, either personally or politically; and the sheer difficulty of changing patterns of (individual) behaviour that have become habitual or are imposed by dominant structures and institutions. The most prevalent explanations, however, emphasized the insidious dominance of “money” (and associated values of materialism) in all aspects of our lives, making it virtually impossible for most people, businesses or governments to see or think beyond their immediate economic self-interest.

I...feel like people are going to do whatever is best for their personal interests these days, especially a lot of our politicians.... Seems like money’s the main goal, not politics. Which is what the world’s probably been like forever. — Group 3

People say... “We can’t consider the environment because the economy is important.” But they are just so short-sighted. They think of jobs, but jobs at all cost.... how can they just think as far as their wallets and that’s it? — Group 1

The critique of “money” most often took the form of generalizations about human nature or sweeping condemnations about the inevitable corruption of politics.

Our results echo very similar findings from research conducted by the American Geophysical Union more than 15 years ago with focus groups of US citizens about a variety of scientific issues, including global warming.

For our participants, public apathy, indifference and hostility to climate action could be traced to a variety of different factors. The most prevalent explanations emphasized the insidious dominance of money in all aspects of our lives.

When thinking about global warming...our respondents typically saw it as being driven by humans who are unwilling to do the right thing, that is a seemingly irreversible deterioration in moral values. What they said, over and over again, was that people have become more self-centered, greedy and materialistic, and as a result, the society is inevitably pushed toward more consumption, which in turn causes more pollution and exacerbates the trend toward global warming.<sup>23</sup>

Simply put, many did not believe that political protests and demonstrations have any tangible impacts and, consequently, simply constitute yet another form of political spectacle in which the appearance of action replaces “real” action.

The origins of such cynicism are complex and most certainly go far beyond what we learn about “other people” from the news. Most important for our research, though, are the significant effects that these perceptions have upon the reception and interpretation of news about climate politics. Cynicism about the public (or “human nature” in general) is ultimately as corrosive and toxic as pessimistic accounts of governments or policies: while the latter may signify the corruption of *particular* political institutions or processes, the former suggests the impossibility of politics itself, at least in any democratic sense. The belief that most others do not share one’s own values or beliefs can also intensify feelings of isolation and helplessness insofar as it becomes increasingly difficult to identify (or even imagine) possibilities for political solidarity and collective action. As this disposition becomes more dominant, the likelihood that an individual will take inspiration from or even notice more optimistic narratives of climate politics begins to fade. Accordingly, we believe that giving the public a different image of itself — or, more specifically, giving the alarmed and the concerned a much deeper and stronger sense of their own shared values and identity, motivation and potential for collective mobilization — is one of the highest (and most immediate) priorities for not only climate journalism but all forms of climate change communication.

## “SO WHAT?”: CYNICISM ABOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Reluctant cynicism is at its most fragile when faced with news about civic engagement and political action. Each one of our groups identified the second set of news articles, which dealt with concrete local and global examples of climate activism, as far more enlightening, inspiring and engaging than the first set on global negotiations and climate policy. Indeed, the mood in the room shifted noticeably as participants read and responded to these articles — for example, there were more smiles, and some participants expressed a sense of relief at being presented with examples of people “doing something.”

We will review the positive impacts and potential of this type of news in the next section. However, it is also important to recognize the deep ambivalence many participants nevertheless displayed with respect to news about activism. Virtually all of them were enthusiastic and excited by stories of real people actually engaged in climate politics; however, many remained deeply skeptical about the ultimate political efficacy of collective action.

Simply put, many did not believe that political protests and demonstrations have any tangible impacts and, consequently, simply constitute yet another form of political spectacle in which the appearance of action replaces “real” action.

Participant 1: It’s a great thing to do, this sort of thing. They’ve got...Earth Hour and that sort of global participation movements to make this issue known. I think it’s a great sort of initiative, but then I wonder. The practical part of me, or the cynical part of me,

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23 Immerwahr 1999.



that says: but now what? What has this actually achieved? Has this changed anybody's perspective? Has it affected any policy change? And I guess that's what I feel is missing from that....

Participant 2: The climate demonstrations, my comment was "So what?" — Group 5

Other groups had similar reactions: respect for the groups and individuals involved, but serious doubts about efficacy.

I like to see that there are people around the world that are concerned and thinking about this.... [but] I still wonder...so what? Is this going to ever be enough? And even if we get full public engagement, can we ever be more powerful than corporations that really set the agenda, and get enough awareness within enough time? — Group 1

This [350.org climate demonstration] is pretty amazing with its photos, because all of these are very clever.... It's all impressive, I love it. But the fact about protests is...it's a very very small percentage of protests that actually accomplish anything in the long run. — Group 3

Much of this sentiment arose from the expectation, shared by most participants, that protests, demonstrations and other forms of activism must produce concrete and visible results that are both immediate and long lasting or they are a waste of time and energy. Some interpreted the number of people involved in any particular action as directly representative of the proportion of citizens who hold similar views: "I was actually sad for [the 350.org protesters].... It was nice that they were trying, but with how many billions of people — this is a really bad, sad turnout, looking at these photos" (Group 2). Such sentiments reflect a somewhat thin "all or nothing" conception of the role that political activism can and does play in a democratic society. There was little consideration, for example, of the cumulative or indirect impacts that successive waves of activism can have over time. Few mentioned the *communicative* effects of such actions — that is, the chance these actions give citizens to collectively express their frustration with government and corporate inaction, experience forms of political solidarity with other like-minded individuals and thereby reshape perceptions of public opinion on climate change.

Stories about activism clearly intrigued and inspired the participants, but absent any discussion of impacts many defaulted to a cynical perspective as they filled in the blanks themselves.

While some attributed their skepticism to the inherent limits of activism itself, others explicitly connected it to the isolated, often abstract representations of activism one tends to find in the media in which little effort or attention is devoted to explaining the *objectives*, *effects* or *broader context* of such actions. The 350.org item, noted one participant,

... doesn't really do a good job of making you feel like...the demonstration they are doing is changing public policy or...reaching anyone. I thought that's...disappointing. — Group 7

Another group described their appetite for more information about outcomes:

Participant 1: I found the [second two] articles really inspiring, but I was very curious about what happens.... With [the 350.org item] I actually assumed there was text on the other side because, like, "Oh, what happened when they went to the UN?"

Participant 2: Yeah, like what was the result of that? And then it didn't get there. So I was curious about where the stories went and I kind of kept a feeling in the back of my mind that it probably, unfortunately, may not go anywhere is how I feel like this story will go. — Group 6

Stories about activism clearly intrigued and inspired the participants, but absent any discussion of impacts many defaulted to a cynical perspective as they filled in the blanks themselves, retreating to dominant political narratives that tend to frame protest — however well-intentioned — as ultimately ineffective, especially in the case of global problems such as climate change.

# Paths to political engagement and efficacy

COMPELLING ARGUMENTS, INSPIRING STORIES and credible, practical examples of effective political engagement hold great potential to challenge and disrupt climate cynicism. This is especially true for people like our participants who are both aware and concerned about the dangers of climate change but find themselves trapped within a cynical worldview that corrodes their motivation to take action. The most corrosive and paralyzing effects of cynicism arise as it cascades and metastasizes through all aspects of climate politics. Disrupting its prevalence in any one of these different areas can, we believe, have transformative impacts in terms of reframing perceptions of the efficacy, desirability and value of political engagement.

## “THIS GUY’S A VISIONARY”: CELEBRATE POLITICAL ACTION

Without question, the most popular item with our focus groups was the profile of Kevin Washbrook, a local climate activist fighting plans to increase coal exports out of Port Metro Vancouver. Participants were especially excited by stories of what one might call *entrepreneurial activism* or *everyday heroism* — that is, tales of people who, through their own initiative, creativity and volition, open up new spaces for political engagement, both for themselves and for others.

It was nice to see somebody standing behind something that they believed in and trying to do something about it instead of just talking and griping.... — Group 2

I kind of liked this one with Kevin Washbrook, mostly because it shows that...one person can make a difference — you know, rally a few people together and get a group going. You know, stand up to corporations and say “Wait a minute, that’s not right.” It

Participants were especially excited by stories of what one might call *entrepreneurial activism* or *everyday heroism* — that is, tales of people who, through their own initiative, creativity and volition, open up new spaces for political engagement, both for themselves and for others.

resonates with me because I belong to a similar group....not this group, but another group. It started with two people in someone's basement, and we ended up with over 200 members, and, yeah, one person can make a difference. — Group 4

I love how he says "I can give money and it gets spent, why can't someone who is educated go and just do it." He's just another person, just like ourselves, and is capable of taking a stand and doing things. — Group 5

I like the [Washbrook story]. You don't have to wait for other organizations to create change, you can just do it yourself. That's the message that's kind of inspiring. — Group 7

The ideal type of the dynamic, motivated and hard-working entrepreneur is one of the most powerful "myths" of our political culture, a trope that is easily invoked, commonly attracts positive thoughts and feelings (of admiration, inspiration, emulation) and, most importantly perhaps, is usually positioned as a *generative social force* — that is, as someone who "takes action" and "gets things done." Deploying an entrepreneurial frame in a political context is appealing, if perhaps problematic, given its association with individualism and personal gain. Another ideal type, the everyday hero, may also be a powerful way to draw attention to the transformative impacts that individuals — and those they inspire — can have in situations that would otherwise be understood pessimistically. Such examples use the power of stories to challenge habitual narratives of cynicism by providing real, tangible examples of political action. They also can function as a connector between the realm of collective action (which tends to be difficult for many people to conceptualize) and individual action (which in the absence of linkages to political or collective dimensions tends to default to green behaviour change).

The everyday hero trope may be a powerful way to draw attention to the transformative impacts that individuals can have in situations that would otherwise be understood pessimistically.

It is also worth noting the synergistic effects that were produced as the two stories of activism were read and then discussed together as distinct yet complementary strategies for generating political change.

We need both. We need people who are getting out the message throughout the world, which is these folks, and people doing something in their home place, which is this man. So I'm happy with both of these. — Group 3

Participant 1: The thing with the climate demonstrations, it shows just the sheer number of people that were involved and could get involved, so maybe someone reading this to themselves could think "How could I get involved just like these people?" Kind of like a bandwagon. And also, the Washbrook inspires you to kind of make a difference. It shows that one person can make a difference and it kind of inspires that it is possible, more than the first set.

Participant 2: I think they're both kind of good. The Kevin Washbrook one would inspire maybe an individual to make changes, whereas the climate demonstrations one, if you were...a mayor or premier and you were reading this...you would look at it and say "Wow, all my constituents are in that, I better start making changes and listening to my constituents." — Group 4

While the story about Washbrook resonated more strongly than the 350.org piece, many also liked how the latter story illustrated the broader, global context of climate activism.

I still like this one because it is global, right. I like to feel like I'm connected to people I've never spoken to, that I've never seen, I probably couldn't even communicate with these people. But we're connected by one topic. This guy [Washbrook], I applaud him for

what he's doing. Same thing, it's grassroots. It's when a small group of individuals starts to make a difference, and Margaret Mead said that. That is what does make a difference. So to think that you can't make a difference because you're only an individual or only maybe a few individuals, it's not true.... So I applaud him. I'm very interested in what he's doing. I'm going to look into him even more. — Group 6

As the tone of these comments suggests, the most important effect of news about climate activism was to disrupt, if only for a moment, the cynicism that otherwise dominates how we think, feel and act with respect to climate change. "In the [first two] articles there was just no hope of making any difference, but at least [in the second two] there is a level of hope that will make a difference, and some awareness of people trying...that to me is a little bit more effective" (Group 5). In those moments, more hopeful visions of climate politics begin to take hold and people begin to imagine themselves as participating within those politics in a much more active and engaged manner. As one of our participants noted in closing comments at the end of the group discussion, "I just want to do something [laughter]. I was impressed by the story about the Washbrook guy. I'll take it with me". — Group 7

## "IT WORKED": HIGHLIGHT POLITICAL SUCCESS

A common criticism of news media voiced by many participants is their emphasis upon failure rather than success. This was less an indictment of media for too much "doom and gloom" (which has become an all too common criticism of news coverage of climate change, especially from conservative commentators) and much more a sense that there are lots of examples of successful action undertaken by governments, businesses and individuals that simply go unreported.

All the places where there [are] nuggets of figuring it out aren't shared. So the media doesn't tell us all the success stories.... Let's say [there are] people in Seattle that are doing things that a group in Vancouver would latch on to if they knew they were three steps ahead. If people helped each other out. You know, bike sharing or.... Like I talk about Modo, whatever, but people think I'm from another planet. So the media doesn't share all the good news and success.... — Group 1

Media, in other words, should function as a form of collective intelligence—collecting, analyzing and raising awareness about "best practices" so that people can learn from the experiences of others—but also draw upon such information in assessing the performance of their own governments.

Yet, as noted earlier, participants were extremely skeptical of the positive story about BC's carbon tax. While seemingly contradictory of participants' stated desire for more positive stories, it reinforces the need for more media coverage about policy and system-level solutions. For example, as one participant suggested, news media could be far more proactive in providing positive feedback to citizens about the impacts of sustainable behaviour:

For years now, they've been having us do different things like change to energy efficient light bulbs, change our heating and stuff. And I think you need to actually show people, "Look, what you've been doing already is making the following changes and has helped the environment through x, y and z. Because of this, look at these wonderful results. You should continue!" — Group 2

The most important effect of news about climate activism was to disrupt, if only for a moment, the cynicism that otherwise dominates how we think, feel and act with respect to climate change.

Arguments for more success stories are sometimes equated to a desire for “kinder,” “softer” news—so-called human interest stories—that primarily functions as a distraction from the sobering (and often depressing) truths of politics. To the contrary, we argue that news about *political* success, stories that trace the many effects of political engagement and mobilization, can have a far greater impact upon levels of personal efficacy than news about greening our lifestyles or clean technology. Such stories kindle and sustain our faith in the potential of social and political movements to produce change.

As one’s awareness and understanding of examples and forms of political success grow, so too does one’s capacity not only to resist cynicism in oneself but also to intervene and disrupt its hegemonic presence in everyday political discourse.

During one discussion, for example, skepticism was expressed about the political impacts of the Occupy movement and 4:20 (a movement to decriminalize marijuana) as evidence of the futility of politics. One of the participants immediately intervened, citing the success of decriminalization initiatives in Washington and Colorado: “You were saying that [this movement]...doesn’t affect any change, but...it seemed to legalize the results in those states, so movements can affect change” (Group 5). This intervention may seem trivial, but we believe that such affirmations of political efficacy are of critical importance in challenging political cynicism. In this case, knowledge of political success enabled this participant to defend the virtues and potential of political activism and thereby opened up the possibility of seeing politics as something other than a hopeless endeavour. As one’s awareness and understanding of examples and forms of political success grow, so too does one’s capacity not only to resist cynicism in oneself but also to intervene and disrupt its hegemonic presence in everyday political discourse.

Later in the same discussion, participants were considering how to provide the public with practical suggestions about how to become more politically engaged. Once again, there arose a broadly cynical dismissal of ideas such as donating money or participating in letter-writing campaigns.

Participant 1: So how do you really make an impact? And I don’t know about the letter thing. Do they read the letter? Or is it going in a file?

Participant 2: I have a personal example. There was a lake in the Interior, where they were going to hold an international water ski race, and it wasn’t a very big lake, and it was a fishing lake. Four hundred fisherman wrote to the Ministry...

Participant 1: [Interrupts, sarcastically] Four hundred people...well, you have the numbers right there.

Participant 2: Four hundred people wrote, and they cancelled it right in the middle. They said, “No, it’s not going to happen on this lake”...

Facilitator: Do you think politicians read these types of stories...?

Participant 2: It worked. — Group 5

“It worked.” It *worked*: again, the knowledge, experience and invocation of a single success story were enough to stem and then reverse—at least, temporarily—the flow of cynicism. Much of the time, news about climate change is focused upon what is *not* working, which, admittedly, is inescapable given the dismal record of most governments on this issue. Alongside the failures of political institutions and processes, however, there are also countless examples of political success in which engagement and mobilization by citizens has “worked”—that is, has generated new forms of political solidarity and has produced meaningful and effective political results. Giving such stories a more prominent place in the mix of news about climate politics would help em-

power citizens, especially those who are concerned about climate change, by giving them critical narrative resources with which to resist the attraction of cynicism.

## “IN OUR OWN BACKYARD”: LOCALIZE POLITICAL SCALE

Among the most consistent findings of academic research in climate change communication is the value of localizing information about causes, consequences and solutions.<sup>24</sup> Our focus groups provided strong confirmation of this theme, consistently identifying the local focus of the Washbrook story as motivating higher levels of interest, engagement and even mobilization around coal exports.

I think I’m going to make about 20 copies of [the Washbrook story]. I have friends who live there. They never talk about this—the coal being in their backyard or in their side yard. And I’m going to write a letter to government saying why are you doing this? You say you’re doing carbon taxing, but you’re just flipping it out the other side. — Group 1

For me, the Kevin Washbrook article really makes me think like “Boy, I should pay more attention.” I’m sure there’s lots of other things just like this that are going on. — Group 4

[I prefer] the Kevin Washbrook one because it’s local, and I’ve lived here for 25 years, and I’ve never known that we’re the largest, almost the largest coal exporter in America. And it’s at our doorstep. I had no idea, so that was interesting. — Group 5

This article about [Washbrook] is inspiring because here is a guy who you can relate to, the feelings of frustration this individual has, and you got to admire him to take this on and, there is a local target there. Just see it, this terminal [operating] under the radar.... I will call this guy right now, you know, I want to join this party! So this is a much more empowering article.... — Group 7

This was an issue that participants were drawn to because of its connection to their own community. And many enthusiastically identified the powerful political synergies that can arise when the experience of learning something new is integrated with representations of political engagement that are credible, accessible and appealing. As the positive response to the Washbrook article suggests, this combination of revelation (“I had no idea”) with agency (“I want to join this party”) is much easier to generate in a local context and is especially attractive and important in discussions of climate change, which are usually framed in a national or global political scale.

## “HE’S JUST ANOTHER PERSON, JUST LIKE OURSELVES”: NORMALIZE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

In his study of alternative media coverage of climate politics, Gunster suggests that behavioural research on social norms may hold important clues about how to increase levels of political engagement. Such research distinguishes between the effects of injunctive norms on the one hand (prescriptions for how people *should* behave) and descriptive norms on the other (descriptions of how people *are* behaving), noting that the latter tend to be far more effective in motivating and shaping behaviour.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Rootes 2007 and Segnit and Ereaut 2007.

Many enthusiastically identified the powerful political synergies that can arise when the experience of learning something new is integrated with representations of political engagement that are credible, accessible and appealing.

Showing people that others—and, preferably, others like them, with whom they can identify and empathize—are engaging in a particular form of action is a far better means of persuasion than simply explaining or asserting the need for or the benefits of that form of action.... According to this logic, the best means of increasing civic engagement would be to represent such behaviour as common, widespread, pleasurable and politically effective: in short, as normal.<sup>25</sup>

For many participants, empathy with those portrayed in news items was clearly an important factor in shaping their own desire and willingness to engage in similar actions. Much of the admiration and enthusiasm for Washbrook, for example, grew out of a sense that he was an ordinary person just like the members of our focus groups: “It’s just a story being like ‘Hey, you can do it too’ kind of thing” (Group 2); “He’s just another person, just like ourselves, and is capable of taking a stand and doing things” (Group 5); “Here is a guy you can relate to” (Group 7). One participant even foregrounded the image of Washbrook that accompanied the article as contributing to this perception: “I find the picture interesting on the Kevin Washbrook one. First, it’s what he looks like. It’s kind of weird, but, I don’t know, it’s kind of compelling that he just looks like your everyday kind of guy in a T-shirt, and obviously he’s doing something that seems to be working” (Group 7). Others articulated a similar perspective about the representation of climate activists in the 350.org piece. “Maybe someone reading this to themselves could think, ‘How could I get involved just like these people?’ Kind of like a bandwagon” (Group 4). Another explained: “Humans are social. We like to see what other people do, and if we see that other people are supporting this, we’re going to be more encouraging of it” (Group 5).

Moral injunctions to “get active” in climate politics are a common feature of environmental communication, and they may have some impact in terms of activating values and beliefs that can motivate people to get engaged. But they also risk amplifying feelings of guilt and frustration as people experience and feel pressured to participate in activities that are unfamiliar to them or which they perceive will set them apart from their peers. News that provides compelling stories about the experiences of people who already participate in climate politics—which describes not only why they are active but also how that experience makes them feel, has affected their identity and has changed how they understand and engage with the world—can provide a much easier point of entry into political engagement. Such accounts help bridge the gap between passive and active forms of citizenship, smoothing the transition from the former to the latter as people come to understand different forms of democratic engagement as *normal* activities that people just like them are doing (*and enjoying*) in order to express and act upon their desire to do something about climate change.

## “WE DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO!”: CONCRETIZE POLITICAL ACTION

In the final part of the group discussion, participants were asked to design a news story that would facilitate political engagement with climate change. Despite the explicit instruction not to focus on individual green behaviours, many groups instead prioritized the provision of information about how individuals could reduce their own impact upon the environment. Many stories emphasized “practical” actions such as recycling, taking public transit, making dietary changes and so on. Describing their efforts, one group explained their decision to take a “personal” approach:

<sup>25</sup> Gunster 2012:262.

Moral injunctions to “get active” in climate politics are a common feature of environmental communication, and they may have some impact in terms of activating values and beliefs that can motivate people to get engaged. But they also risk amplifying feelings of guilt and frustration.



Participant 1: What can we do as individuals? What are things that we can do every day? What are some areas that we can focus on? Transportation was brought up.... So, basically, our efforts became “Let’s just zoom right in, scale right down to—we want specific, very specific ways that we can change to impact on a greater level....”

Participant 2: We brought it down to the personal.

Participant 1: Extremely personal. We don’t just want to provide information, but we want to provide information with a focus on “These are changes that you can implement” or “These are directions that we can move maybe without using the government to implement positive change.” — Group 1

Another group designed a story that was targeted to business to give them “a lot of different ideas that they can do that are very simple, that they can implement around their office: doing a little more recycling, a little more composting, promoting healthy choices, environmental choices in their employees” — Group 4. The group later explained that

...part of what led us to the business side...is that so often political changes take so much time and effort, and if you can get politicians behind them, they have to spend months pointing out that they’re doing this, and then it’ll take years to implement anything of value. The smallest changes by businesses can make tremendous carbon differences to our areas, to our communities. They can happen overnight...and it doesn’t require anybody beyond the board of directors and the C-suite. Whereas it would take thousands of us putting together our tiny little changes to make any impact on that level. — Group 4

At one level, the striking absence of political themes in many of the news creation exercises is expressive of the skepticism that many participants held about politics. While discussion about the activism stories briefly inspired more optimistic assessments of political engagement, many quickly defaulted to a cynical, and highly individualistic, perspective when tasked with actually getting audiences engaged with climate change. Speculative and idealistic conceptions of political agency were simply no match for the much more familiar and comfortable scripts of individual behavioural change. Invited to offer any final thoughts on how citizens can influence government decisions, one participant explained:

With our current governments, I feel kind of helpless.... Even if you get a majority of people thinking one way, it’s not really listened to.... If it’s the economics or money that’s basically influencing people who are in power, then as, like, the little person in the street, probably the best way that I can voice my—or have any kind of influence—is through what I purchase. And that’s what I do. — Group 2

Yet it would be premature to read this retreat from politics in the final exercise as evidence of the ultimate resilience of reluctant cynicism. It may, instead, be evidence of the paucity of social, intellectual and cultural resources to support more robust forms of political agency.

I don’t really know what action I can take. I don’t really know what to do about it. That’s the biggest problem. We don’t know what to do! — Group 5

A surplus of political cynicism may well be the consequence of a sober, well-informed and thoroughly realistic assessment of the balance of forces in any given situation. But it can also just as easily arise from a *deficit* of political knowledge, experience or community. While our participants were reasonably well informed about the science of climate change and the contours of national and international climate politics, they had much less understanding or appreciation for the many

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different forms that both individual and collective political agency can and does take, as well as the range of different effects that it can and does have.

Such gaps will not be filled with more and better information about climate politics alone—though a broader and more sophisticated treatment would certainly have positive effects. Instead, our participants showed much greater interest in what has been described as “mobilizing information”:

...content that goes beyond information about the political system or political actors to enable citizens to understand problems related to their communities and to engage in various forms of participatory activities. In other words, mobilizing information integrates political issues and conflicts into the context of the larger community and provides information on whom to contact, how to donate money, or where to voice one’s opinion.<sup>26</sup>

Our research suggests there is a critical demand for procedural knowledge—i.e. knowing *how* to take action—with respect to individual participation in climate politics.

Criticisms of excessively individualist responses to climate change are worthwhile and important when such responses unduly prioritize consumer and lifestyle-based forms of engagement. Yet our research suggests there is a critical demand for procedural knowledge—i.e. knowing *how* to take action—with respect to individual participation in climate politics. The overriding theme for most groups in the final exercise was the need to show audiences *how to get involved*, *how to become engaged* and *how to take action*:

I think we started from the perspective of we need something [where] we can actually do something. — Group 2

You have to do more than just tell them there’s a problem. You have to give them the idea they have some way to do something about it. That they personally can do. — Group 3

We want—just simplistic—we want to promote ways—simple things you can do to reduce climate change. — Group 4

News media could devote much greater energies to tracing, explaining and highlighting how a single *political* action by an individual (e.g. voting, joining an organization, attending a town hall meeting, participating in a campaign) can, as it is brought together with the single actions of other individuals, evolve into a collective political force with transformative consequences. Much greater coverage of social movements could also help people understand how collective action happens, and when and why it is successful, as well as to potentially see themselves reflected in the work of citizen’s groups, neighbourhood associations, non-profits, coalitions, and the many other venues through which people find common cause. There is a tremendous appetite for this kind of political education. As such, framing engagement as a choice between individual or collective forms of action is a false one for our participants. Instead, their real interests lie in the often foggy intersection between these two things and in getting a much clearer picture of the real conditions and possibilities through which the one can become the other.

<sup>26</sup> Eveland and Scheufele 2000:220.

# Conclusion

**CYNICISM ABOUT CLIMATE POLITICS**, not lack of information about climate science, is the single biggest barrier to political engagement with climate change, especially for those segments of the population most likely to become mobilized. Given the spectacular failures of global climate negotiation, the continued refusal of federal and provincial governments to take meaningful action, and the perceptions of an apathetic and indifferent public, our participants were deeply skeptical about the prospects and possibilities of political engagement. Much news coverage, especially stories that emphasize the failures of climate politics, simply intensifies feelings of political alienation, despair and cynicism.

However, after reading and then discussing news about political activism on climate change—especially news that featured a local focus, a compelling narrative and an accessible “everyday hero”—our participants expressed much greater enthusiasm and optimism for political engagement. While many remained skeptical of the broader potential of climate politics, there was much greater willingness to consider the positive impacts of different forms of political activism. Many of our participants clearly empathized with positive portrayals of activists and activism, leaving them both more optimistic and empowered following a discussion with like-minded individuals. As the news creation exercise suggests, our participants want to become more engaged with this issue and take action, and they are looking for simple, accessible and concrete information for how to do so.

It is often said that society is at a crossroads of climate change, and that is particularly true for how climate journalism will choose to represent climate politics in the future. News media can continue to direct a narrow spotlight upon the failures of governments, political elites and international negotiations, leaving a cynical but passive audience with little choice but to dismiss the prospects of climate politics as a hopeless enterprise. Alternatively, reports of failure could be juxtaposed with stories of political initiative, creativity and courage that illuminate the countless examples of activism and engagement through which people in our communities and neighbourhoods are coming together in new forms of solidarity, community and action. The path that is chosen may well have a critical impact upon how and if public(s) that are already concerned and alarmed join with their fellow citizens and become active participants in, rather than helpless observers of, the politics of climate change.

Many of our participants clearly empathized with positive portrayals of activists and activism, leaving them both more optimistic and empowered following a discussion with like-minded individuals.

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