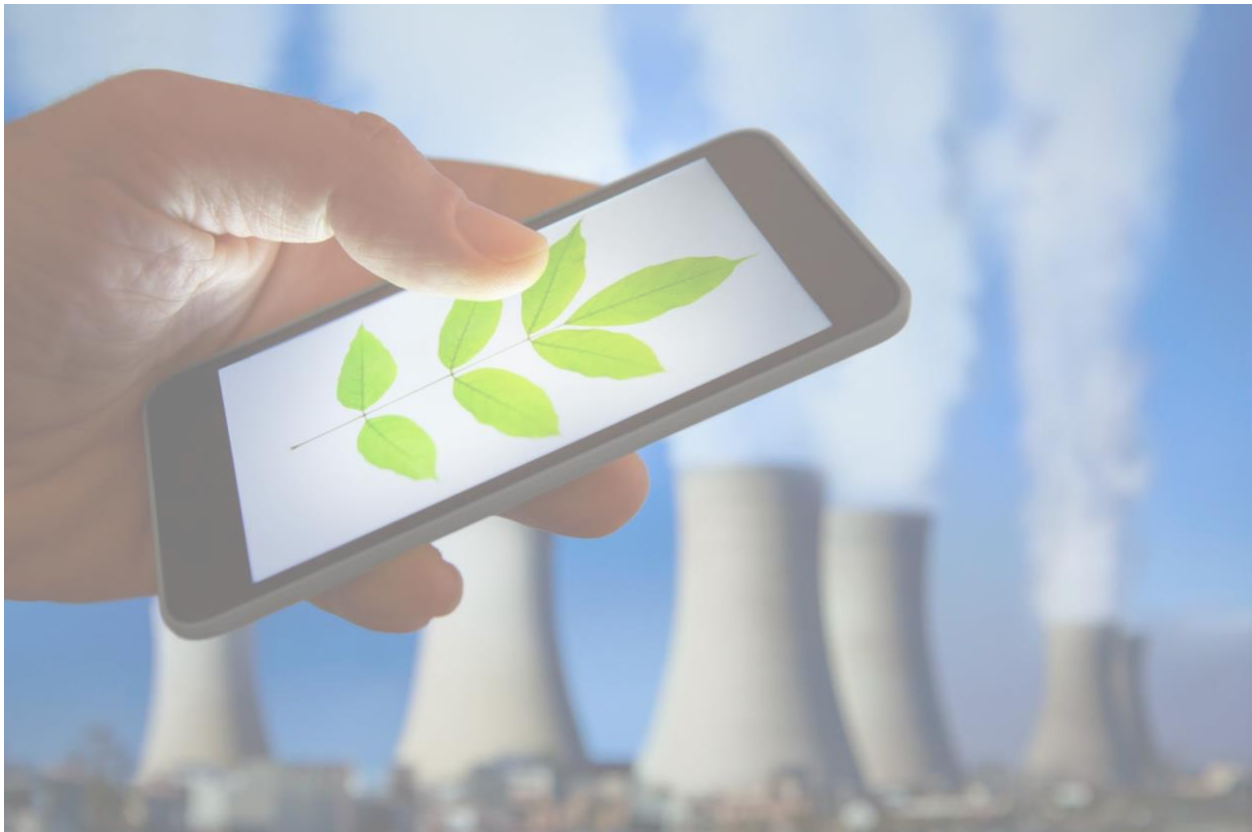


WORKSHOP REPORT

# INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKSHOP

## Publicly Communicating Climate Science in the Platform Era

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## Introduction

On Friday, October 27th, 2023, the workshop *Publicly Communicating Climate Science in the Platform Era* was organized in the Serre of the Botanical Gardens at Utrecht University.

The workshop's goals were: 1. Bringing together academics and stakeholders with a range of expertise on the theme 2. Gaining input for developing a guide on how best to do (mediated) public engagement.

The following report details the event's highlights and key outcomes.

The program was introduced and chaired by Donya Alinejad (Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Culture).<sup>1</sup> Two main questions were raised in relation to the workshop's theme:

1. How can scientists and scholars best **navigate the urgent need for greater public engagement** about the topic of climate change?
2. How must academics **approach public engagement in the current media landscape**?

To address these questions, a range of speakers with experience and expertise within and beyond academia presented their insights and perspectives.

The introduction slides can be found [here](#)

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<sup>1</sup> The event chair was part of the team who organized this event and are actively involved in the seed money-funded project of which this workshop is a part. This team includes the following members: Frans van Dam, Frank Kessler, Peter Kuipers Munneke, Dennis Nguyen, Erik van Sebille, and Jing Zeng.

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## Speakers

### **Communication about Climate Change with the Public, Today: Key Themes and Experiences -- Prof. Erik van Sebille, Oceanography and Public Engagement**

Van Sebille has a dual function, in which he both investigates climate change at the department of physics, and examines the role of scientists in science communication at the Freudenthal Institute. His experience in this dual role has revealed that climate scientists are systematic about their core work of producing sound scientific knowledge, but intuitive and unsystematic about how to do good science communication. In light of the institutionalization of the “open science” agenda, the need for better understanding what meaningful public engagement looks like becomes all the more urgent. Main take-aways:

- Climate activism is not in tension with van Sebille’s scientific work but a product of it.
- Research findings show that the public expects scientists to take strong stances on climate change.
- The university protects scientists who enter the arena of public discussion to speak from their expertise (according to their code of conduct: see presentation slides)

The presentation slides can be found [here](#)

### **Climate Science: How I Navigate Mass and Social Media -- Peter Kuipers Munneke, NOS weather presenter and UU climate researcher**

As a weather forecaster, Kuipers Munneke has a wealth of experience working alongside journalists for national broadcasting (radio and television). He also publicly communicates his research about global warming’s impact on ice sheets, glaciers, and sea levels through public lectures, podcasts, and other media formats. His stated goal in climate communication is reaching the largest possible audience, and reiterated van Sebille’s point about this goal being more intuitive than strategic. He encouraged academics to think

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about their social media use and their broader web presence as a potential gateway to mass media via journalists who use platforms/search engines in their work. Main take-aways

- Use simple and clear language when creating your online presence as an expert.
- Focus on communicating with certainty about established knowledge rather than emphasizing problems and scientific conundrums
- Given that many academics have anecdotal experiences with engaging with the press and other media outlets, it is important to build a resource collecting these experiences.

The presentation slides can be found [here](#)

### **Communication about Environmental Change: the Longue Durée -- Prof. Frank Kessler, Media History**

Kessler has been director of various research institutes related to humanities and media research. His own research focuses on the emergence of cinema as a mass medium and a cultural form, and is working on a project about mediated knowledge transmission in the 19th and 20th centuries. Through striking historical examples of how fossil fuel companies used early media productions to discursively frame environmental problems for the public, Kessler highlighted the power of these mass media narratives from the 1960s by pointing out their continuities with contemporary corporate greenwashing narratives. Main take-aways:

- The power to produce public understanding about climate change and environmental degradation has long been harnessed by powerful fossil fuel companies
- Media narratives are important for designating responsibility and framing the problem

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## **Modalities of Truth-Telling: Crossing Between Activism and Academia, Extinction Rebellion NL, UU PhD researcher in cultural studies**

Chris Julien is an activist and active spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion. He is also a PhD researcher at UU, working on new materialisms, decolonial and eco-thinking, and his work is published in various philosophy journals. Julien emphasized the different ways in which the public can know/accept the reality of climate change, highlighting the difference between intellectual and emotional/emodied modes of knowing. One can say everyone is a climate change denier on an emotional level, since we must insulate ourselves from feeling the enormity of the problem to continue functioning. Bringing home the truth of climate change for the public therefore means deploying a variety of truth-telling modes and approaches.

- Activist truth-telling and academic truth-telling are often operate in separate/modes
- These modes of truth-telling can complement one another to produce sound (both intellectual and embodied) public understanding of and engagement with the issue.

## **How Investigative Journalism tells the Story of Climate Change -- Ties Joosten, Follow the Money investigative journalism platform**

Ties Joosten is an investigative journalist for [Follow the Money](#) and the author of a book on KLM's role in the climate crisis (De Blauwe Fabel). He is currently investigating how the financial sector responds to climate change. Joosten explained that the main problem he encounters is not convincing publics to understand or accept climate change. Rather, the main challenge is to address why policymakers are so resistant to sustainable transitions. He argued the best way to understand this is by tracing and exposing the political and economic interests of powerful actors. Joosten presented illustrative examples of how

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scientists from various disciplines have helped him write investigative journalist stories.

Main take-aways from these accounts:

- It is helpful to investigative journalists when academics write papers/factsheets intended for policy discussions
- Journalists are then in a better position to build a policy narrative around scientific knowledge
- Scientists rarely if ever reach out to relevant investigative journalists to explain and draw attention to their scientific work.

The presentation slides can be found [here](#)

### **Computational Methods for Researching Media Discourses -- Dr. Dennis Nguyens, Assistant Professor of Digital Literacy and Digital Methods**

Dennis Nguyens is an Assistant Professor in Digital Literacy and Digital Methods at the Department of Media and Culture Studies. His research investigates the framing of crises (migration crises, climate change, AI) in public discourses. He also studies the role of critical data literacy in the digital society. Nguyens presented work he has done for news organizations that wanted to better understand their coverage of various issues through large scale data analysis. He highlighted the possibilities for future transdisciplinary collaboration that focuses on generating and addressing societally relevant research questions by tracing online/social media networked discourses, policy document texts, and newspaper articles about climate change issues. Main take-aways:

- There are emerging and promising possibilities for empirically studying how public discourse about climate change is taking shape in societies.
- Data driven research can be an important contribution to journalism and activism
- There are concrete opportunities for collaboration, and researchers like Nguyen are interested in exploring them with societal partners/colleagues.

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## Workshop exercise:

The workshop was designed to generate input for a (Mediated) Public Engagement Guide for Academics. To this end, the participants and speakers were all invited to break into groups and discuss two main questions:

1. What are the most important problems that such a guide should address?
2. What would (not) work for such a guide, based on your experience?

## Key Outcomes

### What should the premises/assumptions be?

- That climate change is an interdisciplinary problem that scholars and scientists from a variety of academic fields want to and should engage with the public about
- That (more) facts don't necessarily convince people
- That media have certain "logics" embedded within them (e.g. institutionally and in media interfaces). As scientists we should be aware of this when engaging with the public via these media forms.
- That media messages and the usage of media platforms can take place in the context of and in support of other forms of action and engagement.
- That the guide is there to encourage engagement - because the public expects experts to engage with the public about their expertise

### What should the format look like?

- Low threshold to entry
- Should be inspirational and motivational. Narrative-driven
- Less academic than Transdisciplinary Field Guide
- Include a plan for long-term availability to users

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## What should the content be?

- Content should reflect that there are multiple modes of communicating scientific truth and it is not a zero-sum game
- Examples should be foregrounded, showing scientists and their experiences
- Should help set goals and strategies for what and how to communicate
- There should be space for the perspectives of those who receive the information to be reflected
- It should contain practical/concrete tips (such as things like how to best reach and build rapport with journalists: by phone rather than email; when to contact the press: Friday afternoon; how to time your approach in line with fast-paced news cycles)
- Should help scientists with tips about how to increase the visibility of their engagement
- It should train academics in both practical skills but also on how to read contextual dynamics around public engagement.
- Should cover ways of protecting yourself when engaging publicly
- Should teach academics/users of the guide to be more aware of the bubbles they are located within in their usual academic practice, and how to expand/move beyond these.
- Emphasis on how to simplify knowledge
- Should help academics to distinguish different audiences and make choices about who to address (trolls, silent majority, followers, etc.)
- Should help academics distinguish the scale of audience and level of impact they seek to have
- Make space for sharing personal/embodied knowledge from one's field
- Help define a clear process, step-by-step plan: what is the occasion? Goal? Who is the audience? What would make the practice a success for you? What is the problem



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or lack you want to address? How long do you want your activity to take? What resources do you need?

- How to engage in a way that plays up and uses your own personal qualities. Will therefore not look the same for everyone in style.
- Address problems of impostor syndrome so that people feel more confident engaging with the public in ways that are appropriate to their stage of career
- Should help scholars not only communicate the issue-specific knowledge relevant to public discussions about also help them communicate publicly what the project of scientific/academic knowledge production is all about (meta-communication).

### **Who should it be for?**

- A variety of users (academics) at different levels and degrees of wanting to do public engagement
- Early development of public communication skills: PhDs should already be trained and prepared for public engagement as part of their programs

### **What should the relation be with UU as an institution?**

- Should be visibly supported by university
- There should be time allocated for these activities

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## Next Steps

- Creation of (first iteration) of guide to mediated public engagement - as online tool hosted by Utrecht University website
- Film short clips of network participants for inclusion in guide
  - Talking about their research about science communication and its relevance for how to navigate practices of public engagement about climate change (and perhaps other urgent, publicly contested issues)
  - Talking about their own experiences with doing public engagement about climate science and related themes