How Climate Change Comes to Matter

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Epilogue

Rethinking Public Engagement and Collaboration

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.

Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

On June 25, 2013, President Barack Obama delivered a “new national climate action plan.” He began by talking about the Apollo 8 mission in 1968 and the images of the “blue planet” they brought back that transformed perceptions of the earth and humanity. He introduced new targets for carbon emissions as well as changes to domestic regulation and foreign policy. But it was Obama’s challenge to the American public that stood out as I put the finishing touches on this book:
What we need in this fight are citizens who will stand up and speak up and compel us to do what this moment demands. Understand, this is not just a job for politicians. So I’m going to need all of you to educate your classmates, your colleagues, your parents, your friends. Tell them what’s at stake. Speak up at town halls, church groups, PTA meetings. Push back on misinformation. Speak up for the facts. Broaden the circle of those who are willing to stand up for our future.

Obama’s call to Americans to exercise their citizenship by using every avenue available to educate their communities illustrates perhaps most poignantly how the conditions persist that drove the research questions in this book. Yet “speaking up for the facts,” as this book demonstrates, is no simple task, not even for those invested in producing and circulating those facts to much wider audiences. It is strongly apparent, however, that persuasion and speaking for the facts involve and enroll social ties and affiliations, but not just in terms of a transfer of information or a “pushback on misinformation.” The communal life of facts matters in explicit and implicit ways—it matters in terms of directing attention (and attentional rest), adjudicating debates, deciding what side one wants to be associated with and “what’s at stake,” and knowing who and what can be trusted. Not only science, but the social determines ethical and moral value—and the consequent rationale to act—helping to resolve challenges to long-held ideals and norms, adapt practices and modes of communicating facts, and navigate epistemological difference.

Climate change requires such a negotiation with ethics, morality, and meaning-making in collective and individual terms—a negotiation that moves us beyond the fuzzily beautiful vision offered by a “blue planet,” toward a multifaceted engagement with how facts and information come to matter beyond and within the scientific contexts in which they first emerge. The social and professional groups recorded here bring the multiplicity of such processes, and inherent shifts in norms and practices, into sharper focus. Climate change as a form of life is constituted and defined through its use. Only as this process of collectively defining what climate change means continues to unfold can one ask and begin to answer something akin to Wittgenstein’s language games: What does it mean to believe in climate change? What does it mean to have a future with climate change? What will it mean to inhabit that future?
Public Engagement and Experimental Futures

In using the concept of an emergent *form of life* as a method, I’ve sought to examine the ethical and moral contours by which climate change has come to have meaning collectively and, by extension, individually. I’ve drawn on ethnographic evidence to construct an experimental system for understanding collective efforts at defining climate change, its rules, grammars, and associations. Each chapter provides multiple points of entry to understanding the ways in which climate change has been translated and rearticulated for and by groups, morphing ideas about who can speak for, about, and to the issue—and how to speak about it. Yet this book also provides a tableau for future engagement and an adjoining of knowledges such that negotiation and engagement might occur—even as differences (and resonances) in goals, vernaculars, and epistemologies become apparent.

Climate change poses an intellectual, scientific, and moral challenge. It is a problem of assessing what is happening, what might happen, and how to act in the world, as well as an evaluation of epistemological differences. Who the messenger is, how climate change matters for the group, and how they code it for immediate response and action defines climate change’s form of life for that group, but it also generates questions about collaboration when definitions, associations, rules, and grammars differ. What does collaboration mean when goals related to climate risks are differently configured? How much do epistemological differences matter? Configured as differences in epistemology, “speaking up for the facts” might require as much listening as it does speaking.

The presentation and circulation of information provide only partial answers and require a partnership with codes for meaning, ethics, and morality in order to delineate what the stakes and risks entail. Framing long-term uncertain issues in order to generate immediate action requires collaboration. Societies dominated by evolving chains of postindustrial risks must confront the definitions of risks as well as the question of how they will unfold and how to respond (Beck 1992, 2002).

The competition for defining climate change is continually played out in the media, enrolling some translations and rejecting others. Indeed, this is what comprises emergent forms of life (Fischer 2003). Debate in a risk society is over how to define the degree, scale, and urgency of risk and, in so doing, opens up rifts between those who produce and those who consume these definitions (Beck 1992). Media change has begun to
create records of these evolutions (and revolutions) through blogging and the recontextualizing and repositioning of mainstream articles in social media.

Verification, professional norms, and accountability will surely continue to be negotiated long after Twitter and Facebook cease to be the dominant platforms for social networking. But what new opportunities for wider public participation have wrought is nothing short of transformational for journalists and particularly so on contentious expertise-laden issues with moral and ethical contours. The role imagined for journalism in our democracy has traditionally been one of informer, agenda-setter, and watchdog, but journalists and news organizations now need to add decidedly different tasks to their obligations—that of forum-provider, chief discussant, and lead verifier. Climate stories are now subject to scrutiny and counterclaims—what Bruno Latour (2004b) has called “instant revisionism”—from concerned audiences with diverse perspectives.

For those engaged in this issue, epistemological concerns are now foregrounded: how evidence is deployed, who is speaking for it, and where scientific knowledge has been produced are vital details. For wider publics, what flows from the “so what” question is a drive to know and understand more, to do something, to adopt a position, to be part of discussions about what ought to be done. The ways in which facts are socialized is key to the establishment of climate change if, as is argued by such a wide spectrum of those engaged with the issue, action is required related to the facts.

Throughout this book, I’ve used the term public engagement to signal the need and desire of those invested in educating, informing, and motivating the public to act on climate change. The term engagement implies both a desire to find out more about an issue and an ethical obligation to become concerned and to act (Callison 2009). Engagement is not only awareness, nor is it just a matter of getting the facts out. Rather, it is a connection most often visible in our social networks, whether it be our church, ethnic group, political party, workplace, school, or other affiliation. Engagement requires collectivity; it feeds on debate so that ethics and associations with an issue might be established. In part, this is why new media continue to play such a large role in the climate change debates. And I am arguing here that engagement is not something the broadcasting of facts can accomplish on its own.
Not Just the Facts

Even though climate change may have begun as a scientific concept, it has flourished as it's been adopted, torqued, politicized, paired. In short, it's been filled with meaning through its interaction with belief systems, practices, and other systems of knowledge. The discursive strategies investigated here are ultimately heterogeneous, emergent, and multivocal. They defy any “framing” of climate change in a static, solely scientific, or progressive/liberal environmentalist fashion.

Defining climate change as a risk presents a conundrum for how to define its scope. Insofar as science is understood as a spectrum of possibilities, risk framing allows for an accounting for potential benefits and losses. Many scientists perceive the facts and the risk framework as requiring the work of near-advocacy—following scientific expertise as it travels into the public arenas, caring and speaking for the science, and attempting to ensure that it is not being distorted or misused.

Full advocacy would subordinate science to political goals, but near-advocacy follows scientific findings into practical realms while trying to maintain the integrity of professional scientific norms. Some scientists have gone so far as to get involved in policy; others have been pushed by a confluence of factors. Economics is rising as a way to discuss valuation and ethical dilemmas, and since my fieldwork concluded, it has become even more common, particularly as risk assessment becomes a dominant paradigm for understanding climate change. Such assessments submerge epistemic differences, even as concerns arise about exaggeration.

I have theorized that in the instances where science is not the sole evidence upon which decisions are made or positions are struck, scientific findings are partners. It means that at times, in STS terms, the science is “black-boxed,” and in others, it is complemented by another knowledge system. The Inuit bring traditional ecological knowledge in the form of oral histories, ground truthing, and other qualitative and quantitative observations and interactions with the natural world alongside science. With Ceres and Creation Care, science is most often put away as settled or, in any case, not up for discussion except in terms of its ethical and/or moral ramifications. Yet science is never completely absent. It hovers in the background, being moved carefully to the foreground when and as needed, however briefly, as an affirmation and to underscore the rationalization or logic already under way.

Journalists have struggled at the local level with the ways in which
climate change is either empty for large swaths of the public, seen largely as a remote futuristic scientific concept still being debated, or full in the politically partisan sense. And while these struggles go on at the national level as well, the negotiation is quite different. Where the science is settled, the immediacy and implications of it are not. Figures like Andrew Revkin and Boyce Rensberger adjudicate expertise, advocacy, and near-advocacy in an attempt to fulfill the role of arbiter for the public, in their role as a fourth estate, watchdog, worthy of the public trust. Journalists’ expectations are that others will trust them while they trust no one, not even the experts. Cornelia Dean explained it to me as an old adage in journalism: “If your mother says she loves you, you should check it out.” As blogging and forms of social media proliferate, it has become increasingly apparent that journalists are being checked out and are increasingly required to verify others as well (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007).

This question of expertise and what form of climate change it represents is one this book foregrounds. It is in some ways a continuation of debates about the role of expertise in the public domain, one begun by Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. However, unlike Lippmann’s formulation, the question of expertise is not only about dominant knowledge paradigms. Instead, the social groups I have studied here ask who gets to speak for climate change and how it might be defined in their terms. Expertise in this sense is being morphed by those who are investing climate change with particularities all the while reinforcing its universality and status as a multifaceted form of life.

**Climate Change as Risk and Reminder**

Risk opens up ethical challenges that can’t be understood only as problems of expertise or translation. Kim Fortun’s analysis of the aftermath and advocacy after the Bhopal gas explosion led her to ask how to account for the ways in which disaster creates community. She theorized that enunciatory communities come together in response to a temporary paradox, as a result of contradiction, force, and double binds. Advocates establish “how the past should be encountered” and “what counts as adequate” in terms of description and explanation. Fortun is describing something different—climate change is a slow motion disaster by contrast, but there is a similarity to the global connectedness, exclusions, expansiveness, ethics, and predictions of catastrophe she describes.
Reading climate change through Fortun’s work led me to ask: how do we account for the way risk creates or, rather, reminds us that we are community? Climate change presents a range of predictions that vary from mild and inconvenient to world-altering, even near-disaster-movie kinds of scenarios, if we include abrupt climate change within the range of possibilities. It makes clear that what gets put up into the atmosphere circulates and has an effect on polar communities far from the origins of most greenhouse gas emissions (notwithstanding the north’s own grid related to housing and transportation). For those with a security focus, it makes clear how dependence on natural resources can exacerbate seeds of conflict that might, in prosperous times, go uncultivated. In short, it breaks down many of the barriers that wealth and power have erected between geographically and socially disparate places. And climate change provides the impetus for creating networks fueled by much of the same wealth and power through routes established by science, media, and national and international policy.

The issues of justice, equity, and connectedness sit uncomfortably on the terrain of mitigation and adaptation solutions—of who and what are considered vulnerable enough to warrant immediate action. As Stephen Schneider put it to the group of reporters in Oregon, the debates are most often about fairness. Advocacy on climate change attempts to establish how the future should be encountered and considered. This is most evident in policy discussions and economists’ debates about the discount rate. But policy ties all the groups together. It is the intervention that may, by many estimations, determine what the future will look like. Attempts at intervening into or affecting policy make evident the moral and ethical codes and norms of each group.

Creation Care’s interventions into policy about climate change have been about concern for impoverished countries (albeit an undefined, somewhat utopian vision of otherness and poverty) in American legislation. The Inuit have intervened regarding cultural and communal survival at the international levels with the human rights petition, seeking to put pressure on the United States. They continue to work at the international, regional, and national levels of policymaking so that their voice is heard within the Arctic and as an Arctic voice reminding the world that there are people and cultures at stake at one of the poles. Ceres has been working on legislation that might put a price on carbon and regulate emissions, but also at the level of the SEC so that disclosure of risk might
be regulated. Science experts work with the IPCC or through other mechanisms in order to see the science predictions receive the response they warrant—the work I’ve described as near-advocacy.

Predilections toward alarmism (justified and otherwise) are very much related to how one experiences a future with climate change and what ethics one applies to the portent of such a vision. One journalist I heard speak said it this way: alarmism is needlessly ringing the alarm bell, but what if the alarm bell needs to be rung? Sheila Watt-Cloutier put it even more strongly when she said, “I think that some people have not fully come to understand that there is no disconnect between suicide and climate change.” In other words, social problems, the continuance of culture, and the state of the Arctic are bound together. In this formulation, climate change continues the process of foreclosure on hope, begun by encounters with colonialism and the enduring structures it put in place via education and the now slowly evolving mechanisms for governance and self-determination.

What this brings to the foreground then is the route between feeling, experiencing, knowing climate change as either a prediction or lived experience and making changes to policies that might address the causes and effects of climate change. That route is multifarious and marked by shifting assemblages and institutions called into being by the heralding of climate-related risks. The social groups thus provide an added dimension of those outside the juggernaut of news-making scientists and formal policy negotiations. Bringing them together exposes the ways in which vernacular guides the formulation of climate change as an experience, dictum, and ethical directive both for the group and the public at large. Climate change becomes the starting point for explaining how we, as global communal members, fit together under a rubric of ethically and morally shaped relations. But that “fit” is a moving target and one that plays differently depending on what nationalistic, professional, or capital-oriented audience climate change is being presented. This is indeed what makes it difficult to engage wide publics with climate change as a fact requiring action.

As I pointed out in chapter 5, using Beck’s formulation, risk acts to unite societies, but it also creates new loci of conflict, alliances, inequalities, exploitation, and regionalizations. At the geopolitical level, this is what much of the climate negotiations at the UNFCCC or IPCC make wholly evident. But policy negotiations provide only one part of the equation. The shifting assemblages of media, bureaucracy, institutions, and
advocacy groups provide another window on the ways in which risk both acts as a herald of change and calls it into being. Climate change effects change precisely because of its status as a risk that could reorient topographies of wealth and power. How or whether the status quo can be maintained or disrupted depends on the view one has of both the present and the future.

Justifying and calling for such changes require a momentum that begins for many with shifts in public opinion, and for this, media and communication in general remain crucial. This in part explains the calls for the media to do better at getting the point across, motivating the public, getting the science right so that the fact that something should be done becomes self-evident. Yet has media been expected to do what it is incapable of doing—investing meaning, ethics, and morality in a particular issue such that the public is called to act?

In thinking about the role of media and information, I have built on observations by Herbert Gans and Michael Schudson that information does not necessarily lead to participation. And yet American democracy, to a large extent, is built on the notion that we need to be informed in order to participate, in order to do our duty as citizens, whether it be casting a vote or advocating for change. That information is seen to flow largely through media.

The rise of new media has made apparent the wide variety of voices and responses to mainstream discourse. I had expected to find the social groups I researched to be heavy users of the renegade change application that is new media, but many were still focused on getting and keeping the attention of mainstream and/or leading reporters like Andrew Revkin or, as was the case with Ceres, getting the attention of the business press. This was beginning to change toward the end of my research as the full potential of social media began to emerge. The confluence and difficulty of strategizing with and for media, as is often the case with social groups with limited resources, illustrate just how tenuous and changeable the media landscape is.

Andrew Revkin, about five months into running his blog Dot Earth, came to an event I helped organize at MIT in 2008. During his panel presentation, he summarized a conversation he had with the late Stephen Schneider. Revkin had told Schneider that the questions related to confronting sustainability issues were much broader than journalism alone. Revkin asked: “Can journalism handle it, and can science handle it?” To which Schneider replied: “The question is whether democracy can sur-
vive complexity.” Certainly, when information is at the heart of such a question, it gets more and more difficult to see how the public and policy-making can adjudicate increasingly complex interests, information, and resulting configurations of possible action. Climate change does indeed present such a challenge to democracy—one that requires a shift toward acknowledging the challenge of defining emergent forms of life and negotiating with varied ethics, morality, and meanings.