Review

The challenges of communicating climate change

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A. Carvalho, Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions, Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Universidade do Minho (2008).

ABSTRACT: *The climate change issue has become increasingly present in our society in the last decade and central also to communication studies. In the e-book "Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions", edited by Anabela Carvalho, various scholars investigate how climate change challenges communication by looking at three main aspects: the discourses of a variety of social actors on climate change; the reconstruction of those discourses in the media; the citizens' perceptions, understandings and attitudes in relation to climate change.*

What are the meanings associated with climate change among the different stakeholders worldwide and how have those meanings been produced, reproduced and transformed? How have the media in different countries been representing this issue? How do people perceive climate change and to what extent are they integrating it into their actions? These are the main questions underlying the e-book "Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions", edited by Anabela Carvalho and freely available online at http://www.lasics.uminho.pt/ojs/index.php/climate_change/index.

The climate change issue has become increasingly present in our society in the last decade. Media attention peaked especially during the 2001 and 2007 reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or after extreme events such as the 2003 heat wave or the Hurricane Kathrina, which have been connected with climate change in a way or another. The message that climate, possibly bringing diffuse warming on earth, is changing, has been framed also by politicians, NGOs and a variety of stakeholders. Moreover the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize has been assigned ex-aequo to the IPCC and Al Gore, former vice-President of the United States of America, another sign, if needed of the importance of climate change and climate change communication.

The theme has become central also to communication studies. Many authors have analyzed climate change communication in the media, or the impact of some movies on the audience. Anabela Carvalho, University of Minho (Portugal), has been very active actor in this field, with various papers, and now calls our attention to a more organic and ambitious work. Resulting from the conference 'Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions' that took place at the University of Minho on 19-20 November 2007, Carvalho presents a collection of 10 papers coming from various research groups around the world, dealing with a range of science communication issues related to climate change.

The aim, as states Carvalho in the introduction, is "to contribute to understanding the circular relations between these three aspects: discourses, meditations and perceptions". Hence the book is divided in three parts. In the first part, where authors analyzed the discourses of different actors on climate change, particularly interesting is the analysis of the communication between scientists and stakeholders involved in a common research project (performed by Anne Cristina de la Vela-Leinert of University Greifswald and Dagmar Schroeter of Austrian Environmental Agency). Also convincing is the chapter about the ways climate change was framed in policy statements in the Montreal summit of 2005 (research done by Mirjia Vihersalo's of the University of Lapland, Finland).

The second part concerns the relationship between media and climate change and here stands out Carvalho deep analysis of the representations of climate change in the Portuguese media. The third part of the book is dedicated to citizens' perceptions, understandings and attitudes in relation to climate change. This part contains a chapter on people's social representations of climate change and their relations with the media, by Rosa Cabecinhas, Alexandra Lázaro and Anabela Carvalho.

Besides the high points of the book there are also weak ones. The scholars analyze different issues in the context of Germany, USA, Mexico, Portugal, Poland and other countries, consider an universal approach to discourses and very local analysis of perception. This heterogeneity is sometimes confusing, as it appears clear from some chapters that there is a specificity for each country in establishing discourses, mediations and perceptions. Unfortunately the challenge of doing such a research in each country is demanding and probably related with specific projects.

There is also a lack of attempt to draw a general conclusion, to summarize on the circular relations between discourses, mediations and perceptions. Even if weaker such conclusion would have been a bookmark for future researchers in a challenging field.

Nonetheless "Communicating Climate Change: Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions" is a useful survey and an effort worth repeating at different levels, national and international. It offers good examples on the state of the art of the analysis of climate change communication, with a variety of research approach, from questionnaires to content analysis to focus groups. The lack of homogeneity, the absence of conclusions, the different context suggest indeed that there's plenty of space to deepen the research, organize common effort projects and pursue new connections.

Author

After a Master in chemistry Emilian Feresin took a PhD in chemistry at the university J.W. Goethe of Frankfurt am Main (Germany). He then switched to science journalism and he recently got a Master in science communication at the Sissa University in Trieste (Italy) with a thesis on climate change communication. In April 2008 Feresin began a Research Fellowship at SISSA, where he focuses on neuroscience and public engagement within the European communication project bid-brains in dialogue. E-mail: feresin@sissa.it.