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Rhetoric, Climate Change, and Social Justice: An Interview with Dr. Danielle Endres

Danielle Endres
University of Utah, danielle.endres@utah.edu

Michael D. DuPont
Iowa State University, dupont@iastate.edu

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Abstract

The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis had the opportunity to interview Dr. Danielle Endres (Ph.D., University of Washington)—an Associate Professor of Communication and faculty in the Environmental Humanities Masters Program at the University of Utah. The interview discussed how rhetoric influences and shapes our societal understandings of climate change, strategies for mitigation and adaptation, and the intersections of social justice and environmental action.

Keywords

Rhetoric, Communication, Climate Change, Environmental, Social Justice, Critical

Rhetoric, Climate Change, and Justice: An Interview with Dr. Danielle Endres

Interview conducted by Michael DuPont

The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis had the opportunity to interview Danielle Endres (Ph.D., University of Washington)—an Associate Professor of Communication and faculty in the Environmental Humanities Masters Program at the University of Utah. She is also the Director of the Communication Institute, which has a mission of promoting communication research and teaching to broader public communities. Her research focuses on the rhetoric of controversies and social movements including environmental justice, American Indian activism, nuclear waste siting decisions, climate change activism, and energy policy. Endres is the co-author of *Participatory Critical Rhetoric: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Studying Rhetoric In Situ* and co-editor of *Social Movement to Address Climate Change: Local Steps for Global Action* (Cambria Press, 2009) and has published in leading scholarly journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies*, and *Environmental Communication*.

Q. How has studying rhetoric informed your understanding of climate change?

A. As a rhetorical scholar, I fundamentally believe that the language and other symbol systems we use have power, influence, and consequence in the world. They not only reflect and represent, but can also alter our realities. Rhetoric can change the ways we collectively organize, construct, make sense of, and engage with our socio-material worlds.¹ Rhetoric is a faculty and an art that is used to attempt to influence and persuade audiences within the realm of *phronesis*, or seeking the best solution in a situation wherein there is no one true answer. It is a civic endeavor, focused on the importance of deliberation, advocacy, and argument toward making collective decisions in a particular time and place. Rhetoric is also a way of understanding the complex effects, circulation, and consequences of language and other symbol systems; to understand how language has a life of its own that we cannot always predict (think of memes). I spend this time here to explain how I think about rhetoric because in common parlance, the term often implies a deceptive, unethical, and hollow form of communication. Rhetorical scholars have been fighting this conception of rhetoric since Plato called it a form of trickery. While I do not deny that language

and argument can be used to deceive (just as many members of the public have been deceived into believing that climate change is not happening), this is not what rhetoric is. Rather, rhetoric is a complex articulation of messages that do things in the world. It is our job to understand the effects and consequences of those messages as they circulate and do things in the world. When I bring this perspective to climate change, I am attuned to thinking carefully about how climate change is a social problem, and how the ways we talk about it, the solutions we seek out, and the divisive politics around it are, in part, questions of rhetoric.

Climate change is not only a material phenomenon; it is also a social phenomenon. We cannot hope to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, slow the warming of the planet, and adapt to the changes already in effect without broad societal change. Yes, the science is unequivocal, but what we do with the science is up for deliberation. There is no one simple answer to solving climate change. Yes, we need to cut greenhouse gas emissions. But, cutting CO₂ emissions is highly complex in terms of implementation—it requires making tough political decisions on local, national, and international levels, rallying divisive and fractured publics, understanding how national and even international regulations interact with multi-national corporations, and evaluating a variety of low-carbon options. I like how political scientists John Dryzek, Richard Norgaard, and David Schlosburg note that “Climate change presents perhaps the most profound challenge to have ever confronted human social, political, and economic systems.”² It is a quintessential “wicked problem.”³

Communication, and more specifically rhetoric, has a central role in addressing this wicked problem because we cannot deliberate about, choose, and implement solutions without turning to communication and rhetoric. Hence, we have the growing field of climate change communication.⁴ This field exceeds rhetoric in its focus on the multifaceted communicative dynamics of climate change (including empirical studies of media coverage and framing, public understanding of the science of climate change, etc.). Yet, what rhetoric reminds us is that any attempt to make change, reduce greenhouse gases, and address climate change will involve complex forms of argumentation, advocacy, and deliberation that begin with the rhetorical choices we and others make.

Q. How do you see ideologies and social systems evolving the arguments around mitigation and adaption?

A. Arguments about mitigation of and adaptation to climate change are inherently influenced by social systems, including ideology. I would say that ideology is fundamentally important to

understanding both the gridlock and the potential solutions surrounding climate change. With regard to climate skeptics and climate denialism, we cannot deny that ideology plays a role. As rhetorical scholar Leah Ceccarelli has pointed out, climate skepticism is a “manufactured controversy” that represents particular interests. She points to the Luntz memo as an example of how a political strategist and professional wordsmith encouraged the Republican Party to present global warming as a controversy to advance the interests of the party.⁵ Likewise, evidence has recently been uncovered that even though Exxon (now Exxon Mobile) knew about climate change in the 1970s, the company would not publicly acknowledge that climate change was happening and instead funded research that supported the manufactured controversy around climate change.⁶ As one of the largest fossil fuel energy companies in the world, it is in Exxon Mobile’s interest to continue extracting and producing fossil fuels even if those are contributing to climate change. These examples point to the ways in which our dominant social systems and ideologies support continued fossil fuel extraction, and more broadly support paradigms of growth, extraction, and earth as instrument for human use that contribute to the many environmental crises we face.

While these paradigms may seem intractable, the social and ideological nature of arguments around climate change means that they are rhetorical constructions and therefore able to be rhetorically deconstructed. Not that this is an easy task, nor one that any one piece of scholarship or one activist campaign can do. Yet, if one believes that our social worlds can change—in part through rhetoric but also through many other mechanisms—then we can seek to work toward better understanding *how* social systems and ideologies are embedded within climate change. This is where rhetorical scholarship can be useful in tracing and analyzing the rhetorical formations that have brought us to our current debates about climate change and in possibly imagining alternative rhetorical frames and strategies that can chip away at the dominant paradigms that have played a strong role in the social and material realities of climate change. In my own scholarship in energy communication and climate change activism, I have used rhetorical theory and criticism as entry points into an examination of how deliberation about the future of energy and strategies to push for action on climate change are tied in with discernable patterns of discourse, underlying ideologies, and specific rhetorical strategies and tactics.

Q3. Will you describe how climate change and social justice are interconnected? What risks do we take if we do not address these two topics together?

A3. Climate change, like any other environmental issue, does not affect every person, every

species, or every nation, or every bioregion in the same way. As the IPCC reports have shown, the harmful effects of climate change will disproportionately negatively affect people who are already marginalized, underrepresented, or colonized. This is an issue of equity and social justice that must be addressed as we think through how to address climate change. This becomes even more complicated when we think about issues of justice in terms of development. As we well know, the U.S. and other highly industrialized countries have used up their share (and then some) of global resources in unsustainable modes of development and energy usage. Yet, as we set carbon emission caps and think through ways to curb climate change, less industrialized or rapidly developing countries are asking if it is fair to ask that less industrialized countries to sacrifice just as much as countries like the U.S. who are largely responsible for the climate crisis. The relationship between climate change and social justice, then, is quite complex. Indeed, it is likely a wicked problem in its own right. Yet, if we do not address equity and justice in our approach to climate change mitigation and adaption, we risk furthering systems of racism, colonization, and patriarchy (to name a few) that cause harm to people and environments. The Principles of Environmental Justice that were adopted so many years ago in 1991 recognize that oppression of people, the environment, and other species are linked. Contemporary struggles for climate justice are showing that these linkages remain salient.

Q4. What do you see as key strategies to engage people and communities in discussions about climate change and encourage people to take action?

A4. This is a difficult question; one that climate change communication scholars have been grappling with for decades. For me, there is no one magic bullet communication strategy or set of “best practices” that will encourage people to take action to address climate change. Instead scholars need to be working on multiple levels to understand the complex dynamics at play in social change. We need to think about and understand issues of framing that affect the way people engage with climate change and the environment. We need to think about and understand specific campaigns (both historical and contemporary) that sought or seek social change on individual, societal, and institutional levels. We need to think about how different audiences and particular situations require different rhetorical strategies. We also need to work with other disciplines to seek where communication and rhetoric intersect with issues of psychology, ethics, policy, and sociology to better understand how social change can happen.

Having said that, I do think there are some strategies that can be useful for people who are interested in starting conversations around climate change. Localizing climate change can be

crucial for thinking through an environmental issue of this magnitude and understanding how it relates to one's own community. There has been a lot of scholarship written about the paralysis that can happen in the face of such a large, complex, intergenerational issue. Starting with an understanding of how climate change will affect one's own family, one's own community, one's own place can be a significant pathway to then thinking about ways to engage with this global problem that may not lead as readily to feelings of overwhelm, despair, indifference, or helplessness. Yet, we also need to be cautious not to over-localize in a way that hinders being able to see, for example, how climate change will affect different people and communities in different ways. Another strategy for engaging with climate change is through shifting framing devices. Scholars have shown that the doom and gloom, apocalyptic approach that has often been adopted by the environmental movement has not been effective in moving more than the already dedicated to action. While we know that doom and gloom can be ineffective, we still don't know for sure what frame will work to spur the kind of change that is needed. Indeed, I am skeptical that one framing device will be sufficient since there are many audiences, perspectives, and situations at play. Yet, some alternatives to the doom and gloom include tapping into positive benefits that come from climate mitigation actions, tapping into already existing and meaningful values that move a community, and emphasizing the immense positive power of massive long-term movements for social change that have succeeded in making meaningful institutional changes.

Q5. Do you have any other thoughts on climate justice that you would like to share with our readers?

A5. I think some people see climate change as such an urgent problem that we need to just solve it and worry about the justice implications later. Yet, to me, a world where we have solved the climate crisis but have not solved issues of social and environmental justice is not a world I want to live in and pass on to future generations. If we are able to garner the social energy needed to make the kind of social change that is needed to address climate change, then I think this has to be done with an eye toward channeling that energy towards recognition of the interconnections between environmental destruction and systems of oppression. We might be able to save ourselves from climate change without considering social justice, but we will not have contributed to creating a just and sustainable world.

Notes

¹ This discussion of rhetoric may be recognizable to some readers as rooted in social constructionism; the idea that society is constructed by human culture, language, and organization.

² John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, “Climate Change and Society: Approaches and Responses,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

³ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (n.d.): 155–69, doi:10.1007/BF01405730.

⁴ See for example: Susanne C. Moser and Lisa Dilling, *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Leah Ceccarelli, “Manufactured Scientific Controversy: Science, Rhetoric, and Public Debate,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2011): 195–228, doi:10.1353/rap.2010.0222.

⁶ Shannon Hall, “Exxon Knew about Climate Change Almost 40 Years Ago,” *Scientific American*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/exxon-knew-about-climate-change-almost-40-years-ago/>.