

Disruptive Ideas: Public Intellectuals and Discourses about Climate Change



Matthew C. Nisbet
Associate Professor
Northeastern University



@MCNisbet

Perceptions Are Context Dependent



A B C

Nisbet, M. C. (2009). Communicating climate change: Why frames matter for public engagement. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 51(2), 12-23.



@MCNisbet

Perceptions Are Context Dependent



12/3/14

Nisbet, M. C. (2009). Communicating climate change: Why frames matter for public engagement. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 51(2), 12-23.



@MCNisbet

The *Design to Win* Report (2007)

THE NATHAN
CUMMINGS
FOUNDATION



- “A cap on carbon output—and an accompanying market for emissions permits—will prompt a sea change that washes over the entire global economy.”
- “The good news is that we already have the technology and know-how to achieve these carbon reductions—often at a cost savings.”
- “Climate change, unlike a lot of large-scale problems, is actually one that is solvable. It is also one where we know what we need to do. We have the best data in the world on how to prevent climate change. Everything was ranked by magnitude, location and sector. It’s a systematic approach to problem solving.” – Hal Harvey, *NY Times* profile



@MCNisbet

TABLE 2.3**AMOUNT AND NUMBER OF GRANTS DISTRIBUTED
BY FOUNDATION, 2008 TO 2010**

	AMOUNT (\$)	NUMBER OF GRANTS
ENERGY FOUNDATION	111,871,644	766
CLIMATEWORKS	63,898,794	63
HEWLETT	45,307,700	99
SEA CHANGE	40,630,802	62
PACKARD	39,876,095	113
OAK	29,896,534	49
KRESGE	24,432,660	71
DORIS DUKE	9,383,890	21
MCKNIGHT	3,000,000	2
TOTAL	368,298,119+	1248+

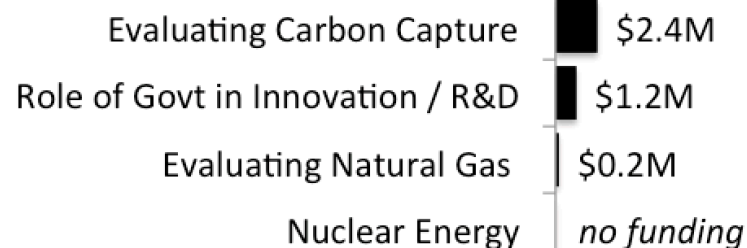
THE DESIGN TO WIN STRATEGY

Amount in Grants Associated with Specific Goal / Technology 2007 – 2010

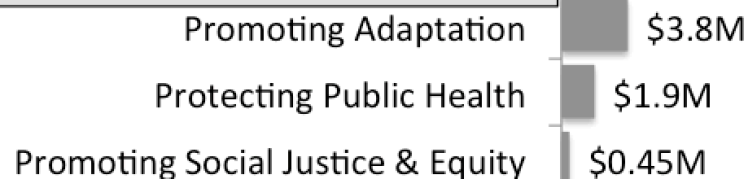
Carbon Pricing & Soft Path Strategy



Innovation & Hard Path Strategy



Resilience & Human Security Strategy



Note: Foundations analyzed include Climateworks, Hewlett, Kresge, Packard, Energy, Seachange, McKight, and Oak. A total of \$368 million was distributed across 1248 grants; other programs and goals funded not shown, see full report.

Source: [Nisbet, M.C. \(2011\). Climate Shift: Clear Vision for the Next Decade of Public Debate. Washington, DC: American University, School of Communication.](#)



#PeoplesClimate: Challenging Globalization and Capitalism



“Our economic model is at war with life on Earth. We can’t change the laws of nature, but we can change our growth economy. And that’s why climate change is not just a disaster, it’s also our best chance to demand and build a better world.”



NAOMI KLEIN **THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING**
INTRODUCED BY DAME VIVienne WESTWOOD



Capitalism vs. The Climate

Join the author of
'The Shock Doctrine' and 'No Logo'
in discussing her most important book yet.

October 8th, 7-9pm
The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford. OX1 3AZ

www.climateoutreach.org.uk

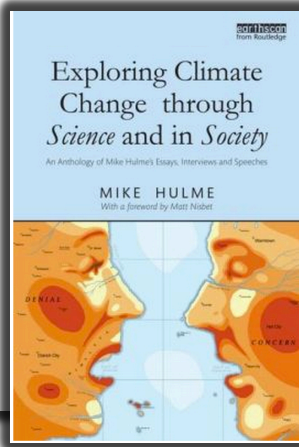
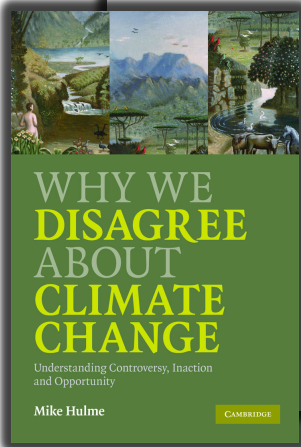


@MCNisbet

Telling Stories about Wicked Problems



- The more complex a problem like climate change, the more **equally plausible discourses and narratives exist** about what should be done.
- Climate change serves as an **opportunity** for different groups to **mobilize on behalf of their values, goals and vision for society**.
- Climate change is “a synecdoche – a **figurative turn of phrase in which something stands in for something else** —for something much more important than simply the way humans are changing the weather,” – *Mike Hulme*



@MCNisbet

Bill McKibben as Public Intellectual and Activist



Joan Shorenstein Center
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
Discussion Paper Series

#D-78, March 2013

Nature's Prophet: Bill McKibben as Journalist, Public Intellectual and Activist

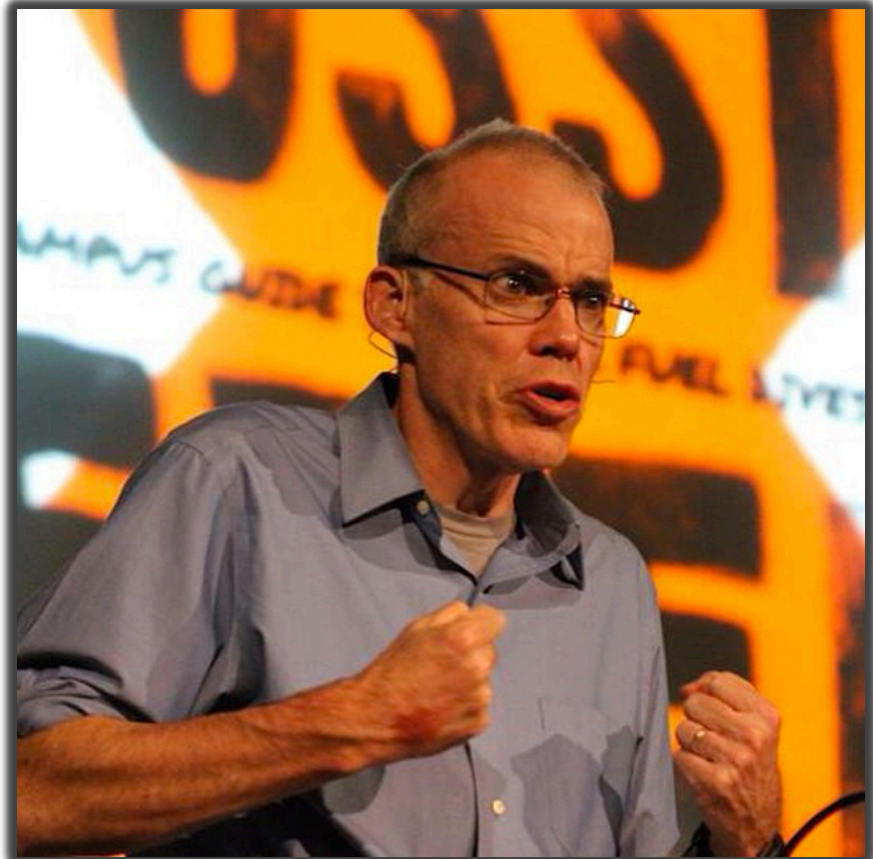
By Matthew C. Nisbet
Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2012
School of Communication and the Center for Social Media
American University

Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •
Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).



Nisbet 2013



@MCNisbet

Who Is a Public Intellectual?



- 1) Write for and engage a broader public on matters of popular concern, rather than narrowly targeting an expert audience and emphasizing the more technical details of a debate.
- 2) Specialize in the synthesis of complex, interdisciplinary areas of research, engaging in deductive analysis across cases and events, “working from the top down,” drawing connections, making inferences, and offering judgments.
- 3) Argue on behalf of causes and policies, serving in the role of social critic, advocate, or activist.



Personalities, Celebrities, and Global Commodities



- **Merge public and private selves** by relating complex ideas or problems to **personal anecdotes**, “journeys,” “realizations.”
- **Appearance, headshot, image, and dress** are likely to be **consistent with the subject matter** they write about.
- Establish **authenticity, commitment** to a topic i.e. “walks the walk,” “practices what they preach” or has acquired **unique knowledge through exceptional experiences**.
- Most are **commodities**, in that their books, writing, and speeches are bound up with a **dense web of promotion, selling, marketing, and millions of dollars in transactions**.



@MCNisbet

Spirals of Attention Online



Global Warming's Terrifying New Math

Three simple numbers that add up to global catastrophe - and that make clear who the real enemy is

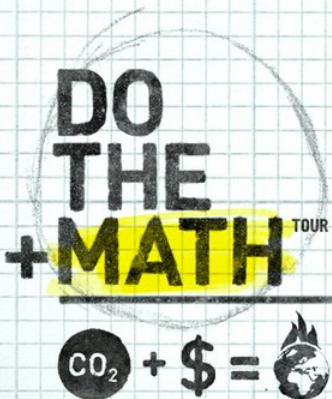
Like 125k Tweet 14.3K +1 2.8k 7,389 Comment 8823



Illustration by Saul Rodriguez

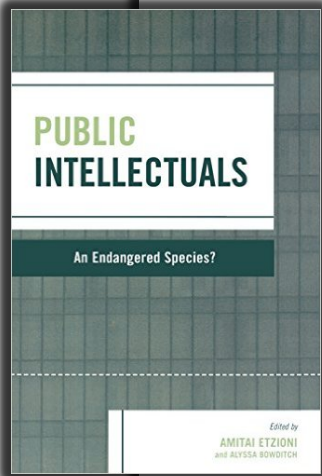
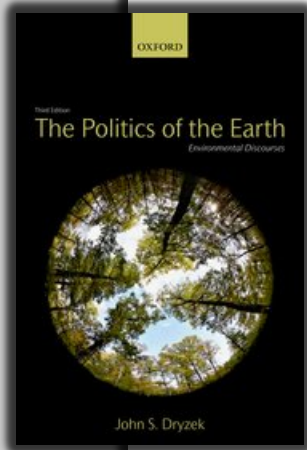
By BILL MCKIBBEN
JULY 19, 2012 9:35 AM ET

- Motivated **“issue publics”** deep dive into subject content across outlets, making the writing of public intellectuals online **participatory and social**.
- Articles become **most popular, read, or emailed at news sites...flagged, highlighted, contextualized, and spread** by way of comments, Facebook “like” buttons, and indicators of how often a story has been re-tweeted.
- **Meta-commentary** and reactions from bloggers and journalists at other news sites turns article or book into **“pseudo-event.”**



@MCNisbet

Creating a Common Language and Outlook



- **Promote a common storyline about climate change**, defining who or what is to blame, what should be done, and what action would mean for the future.
- Discourses **informally guide the decisions** of advocates, funders, journalists, and governmental officials.
- **Define which experts or views might be mainstream** versus what might be **contrarian or out of bounds**.
- Once assumptions and authorities established, **“costly in terms of human mental labor to re-examine what has finally come to be taken for granted.”**
- Other public intellectuals are needed to **“disturb the canonical peace”** and **“defamiliarize the obvious”** by identifying the flaws in **conventional wisdom** and by offering alternative renderings of a problem.



@MCNisbet

The Power of Discourses: Linking Advocates, Experts & Journalists



theguardian
Winner of the Pulitzer prize

Energy Keep it in the ground

The argument for divesting from fossil fuels is becoming overwhelming

As progressive institutions, the Gates Foundation and Wellcome Trust should commit to taking their money out of the companies that are driving global warming, says the Guardian's editor-in-chief as he launches [our climate campaign](#)



@MCNisbet

Ecological Activists



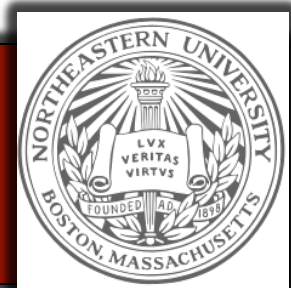
	Problem Framing	Outlook on Nature	Outlook on Technology	Policy Proposals	Model of Social Change
Ecological Activists Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ B. McKibben ▪ D. Suzuki ▪ C. Hamilton ▪ G. Monbiot ▪ N. Klein ▪ P. Kingsnorth 	Capitalism, consumerism has exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet, risking catastrophe, or certain collapse.	Sacred, fragile nature provides human salvation. Must be kept separate, protected against human influence.	Advocate small scale, locally owned renewables. Warn that nuclear energy, genetic engineering too risky, promote consumption.*	Call for strong regulation of industry, rationing of energy use, localization of economies, food systems, governance .	New consciousness spread through grassroots organizing, social protest. Artistic attention to "ecocide," myth of progress. [^]

Notes: * [Monbiot](#) supports nuclear, carbon capture. [^][Artistic expression specific focus of \[Kingsnorth\]\(#\)](#).



@MCNisbet

Smart Growth Reformers



	Problem Framing	Outlook on Nature	Outlook on Technology	Policy Proposals	Model of Social Change
Smart Growth Reformers Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ T. Friedman ▪ A. Gore ▪ N. Stern ▪ J. Sachs ▪ A. <u>Lovins</u> 	Climate change is ultimate market failure, corrected by putting price on carbon. Progress blocked by "deniers."	Nature has limits, but "dangerous interference" can be avoided by smart policy, "stabilizing emissions," enabling "sustainable growth."	Market pricing will drive adoption of renewables, energy efficiency. Need government to catalyze nuclear, carbon capture.#	Call for binding international agreement, national carbon pricing, and government investment in innovation.	Market mechanisms drive change. More recent calls for grassroots pressure, third party movements, new "mindfulness."



Ecomodernists



	Problem Framing	Outlook on Nature	Outlook on Technology	Policy Proposals	Model of Social Change
<u>Ecomodernists</u> Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ S. Brand ▪ M. Hulme ▪ R. Pielke Jr. ▪ S. Rayner ▪ T. Nordhaus/ M. Shellenberger ▪ A. Revkin 	Misdiagnosed as environmental problem and market failure. Should be re-framed as energy innovation and societal resilience challenge.	Nature is more resilient, than fragile. Innovative, high-energy planet can promote human progress, while conserving, managing nature.	Renewables not capable of meeting energy demand. Need government to develop natural gas, nuclear, carbon capture, other <u>innovations</u> .	Argue for portfolio of "clumsy" policy approaches across levels of society, government investment in energy technologies and resilience strategies.	Technologies that lower cost of action, public forums that challenge assumptions create conditions for cooperation, innovation.



Universities in the Anthropocene

J Environ Stud Sci (2015) 5:200–206
DOI 10.1007/s13412-015-0245-9

Discursive diversity in introductory environmental studies

Eric B. Kennedy¹ · Jacqueline Ho²

Published online: 22 April 2015
© AEES 2015

Abstract Introductory environmental studies and sciences (ESS) classes can be powerful and formative experiences for undergraduates. Indeed, instructors likely aspire towards influencing and enhancing the perspectives, analytical tools, and critical-thinking skills their graduates carry forward into careers in and beyond environment-related fields. This task, however, is doubly challenging: not only to meaningfully engage students with environmental issues but ideally also to think critically about the at-times competing ideologies and perspectives in ESS. This requires that courses be taught in ways that further critical thinking, develop metacognitive skills, and introduce students to a diversity of environmental discourses. In this paper, we present the results of a brief empirical survey of a small sample of North American ESS undergraduate programs. Using discussions of climate change as an example, we pay particular attention to the explicit goals, diversity of

Keywords Environmental studies · Environmental science · ESS · Curriculum · Pedagogy · Environmental discourses · Educational evaluation

Prologue

A recent graduate from a small, liberal arts college, co-author Ho was significantly shaped by her experiences as an undergraduate in environmental studies. The vignette recounted below captures the motivation for this research, and the value that the co-authors—both graduates from ESS faculties—have gained from encountering multiple environmental discourses.

My undergraduate education in environmental studies

THE CONVERSATION US PILOT

Academic rigor, journalistic flair

Q Search

Arts + Culture Economy + Business Education **Environment + Energy** Health + Medicine Politics + Society Science +

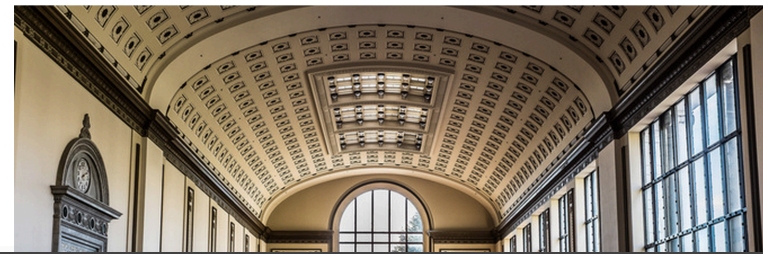


The age of us

Communication, culture & politics in the Anthropocene

A call for greater diversity of thought in environmental studies courses

May 4, 2015 7:44am EDT



@MCNisbet

Further Reading

www.climateshiftproject.org



Advanced Review

Disruptive ideas: public intellectuals and their arguments for action on climate change

Matthew C. Nisbet*

In this paper, I analyze three distinct groups of prominent public intellectuals arguing for action on climate change. I detail how public intellectuals establish their authority, spread their ideas, and shape political discourse, analyzing the contrasting stories that they tell about the causes and solutions to climate change. 'Ecological Activists' like U.S. writer/activist Bill McKibben or Charles Sturt University (AU) philosopher Clive Hamilton argue that climate change is a symptom of a capitalist society that has dangerously exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet. They are skeptical of technological or market-based solutions to the problem, urging the need for a global movement that dramatically re-organizes society. 'Smart Growth Reformers' like UK economist Nicholas Stern or former U.S. vice president Al Gore agree that climate change poses catastrophic risks but argue that those risks can be avoided if political leaders adopt the right market-based mechanisms, enabling sustainable economic growth to continue. 'Economic Modernists' like The New York Times (U.S.) writer Andrew Rossin and Oxford University (UK) anthropologist Steve Rayner argue for recognizing the biases in how we have conventionally defined climate change as a social problem. Progress will be achieved not by relying on social protest or market-based mechanisms, but by government investment in a diverse menu of policies that catalyze technological innovation, protect against climate impacts, and provide developing countries abundant, cleaner sources of energy. To conclude, I propose methods for building on my analysis and urge the need for forums that feature a diversity of voices, discourses, and ideas. © 2014 The Authors. *WIREs Climate Change* published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

How to cite this article:
WIREs Clim Change 2014, doi: 10.1002/wcc.317

INTRODUCTION

In a July 2012 article at *Rolling Stone* magazine, Bill McKibben warned that fossil-fuel companies were committed to extracting as much of their oil, gas, and coal holdings as possible, a goal that would far exceed what scientists had determined was the

world's safe carbon budget. This 'terrifying new math' meant that the fossil-fuel industry was 'Public Enemy Number One to the survival of our planetary civilization', wrote McKibben. Drawing comparisons to the anti-apartheid movement, he called on universities and other institutions to divest their holdings from the fossil-fuel industry.¹

McKibben's article generated millions of social media recommendations and visits to *Rolling Stone's* web site. Among the readers was billionaire activist Tom Steyer, who sought out McKibben to meet for a mountain hike. By the end of their hike, Steyer had pledged to support the fossil-fuel divestment campaign.^{2,3} In the years since, Steyer has divested

*Correspondence to: m.nisbet@neu.edu
Department of Communication Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

Conflict of interest: My analysis in this paper is informed by my collaboration and/or interactions with groups and individuals representing each of the three identified discourse traditions, though my own outlook is closest to that of the Economic Modernists.

© 2014 The Authors. *WIREs Climate Change* published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

CLIMATESHIFT

COMMUNICATION, MEDIA & POLITICS IN A WORLD AT RISK

SHIFTING IDEAS, SHIFTING OPINION, SHIFTING POLICY

SEARCH

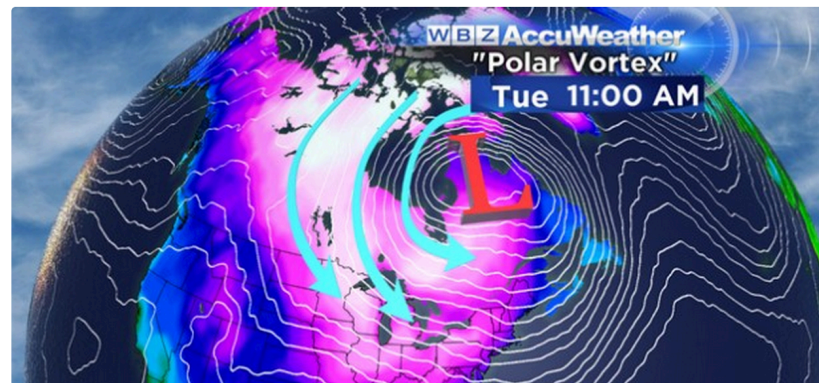
ABOUT MATTHEW NISBET

STUDIES & ARTICLES

BOOKS

COURSES

PRESS



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, COMMUNICATION & THE MEDIA

by MATTHEW NISBET on Sep 21, 2015 • No Comments • Edit entry

In a Spring 2016 course, students analyze major debates over the environment, climate change, and related technologies, studying how they are portrayed by experts, advocates, and the media; and evaluating the implications for effective public communication, policymaker engagement, and personal decision-making.

LATEST ENTRIES



RECENT STUDIES & ARTICLES



@MCNisbet