

SUMMARY

R20 AUSTRIAN WORLD SUMMIT Breakout Session CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

Background

A main outcome of the R20 AUSTRIAN WORLD SUMMIT (R20 AWS) 2018 was to identify that better communication of climate change holds the potential to implement, mobilize and support climate action. For this reason, this year the conference dedicated a Breakout Session to this topic. R20 AWS initiator Arnold Schwarzenegger has often claimed that climate change needs to be linked to other issues, such as health and economy, for better understanding. As one of the most prominent climate activists and motivators for a wide range of people, he fully understands the power of publicity and the media. For this reason he jumped at the opportunity to take part in the Breakout Session discussion himself. There he stressed once again: "We have to find the right way to reach the people." Based on current research results from various disciplines and practical experience, the side event showed best practices and tried to solve some challenges in the current climate debate by addressing issues such as framing, storytelling, narration and communication instruments of mobilization.

Outcomes

Fact-based arguments, strong visualizations, but also success stories are important to motivate people and avoid a defensive attitude when dealing with climate-relevant information. The following arguments and positions were put forward during the presentations and discussions:

Enlarge the group of listeners

- Mobilizing the people is only possible when you really know who your audience is.
- We're dealing with complicated content but need to expand our audience. We do not reach the general public with our complex discussion on climate change. Therefore, we have to tailor the content and find suitable messengers to fit the target group.
- To spread the content more widely, journalists are a vital audience group.

The right messenger

- The messenger is more important than the message itself.
- Greta Thunberg was the appropriate person with a suitable attitude in the right place at the perfect time. Within a few weeks, she achieved more for climate protection than any scientist or politician had managed before her school strike. Young people in particular have become impressed and inspired by Greta Thunberg. She and Fridays for Future mobilized the masses in an extraordinary and unprecedented way.
- Another good example is a video made by German Youtuber Rezo, uploaded shortly before the European Elections in May 2019. "The Destruction of the CDU" (which was also about climate change) received 13 million views within a few days.
- This demonstrates the impact that giving a face to climate protection can have on raising awareness. Scientists, facts and graphics can only reach a limited audience, but finding the right messenger allows for increased identification.

Innovative preparation and illustration of content

- Old school graphics or calculating an individual's own carbon footprint rarely manages to arouse interest in the recipient. Animated graphics (playing with data) make it possible to illustrate the problem at a glance, especially on social media
- A good example: the interactive feature on the impacts of climate change at 1.5C, 2C and beyond of Carbon Brief¹. In 2019, Carbon Brief won the Association of British Science Writers' Award for "Innovation of the year" for this.

The right wording is essential

- Media plays an important role in the presentation and interpretation of data. Communication is always a matter of perspective – as this example clearly shows:
 - Only one third of Germans back the implementation of a CO₂ tax.
 - Already, one third of Germans back the implementation of a CO₂ tax.
- The wording should be carefully chosen: Better "global heating" than "climate change"; better "clean air" than "climate targets".
- More people respond to communicating with humor and positivity (e.g. "Bigfoot exists, climate change does not"). Negativity and communicating gloomy future prospects causes the majority of people to feel like they cannot have an impact. As a result, attention decreases and audiences do not engage.

Don't be too complicated

- To reach the audience, you have to touch the people. More effect can be had by keeping things concise and clear, and through using headlines and pictures. Tabloid journalism demonstrates the possible simplification of complex issues, although we should keep in mind that topics are often over simplified as a result.
 - Headline @Österreich: Sprit: Preis-Schock wegen Sommer-Hitze (Fuel: Price shock due to summer heat)
 - Headline @DiePresse: Klimawandel: Bier könnte knapp werden (Climate change: beer could run short)

Societal change never starts with a majority

- The narrative about climate change has changed: now, it is closer to people than the science communication before. Greta Thunberg and the movement Fridays for Future are showing how communication can touch (young) people.
- What has changed:
 - The political commitment and a shift in thinking about climate change are increasing.
 - It's important to recognize: When you identify other people fighting the same fight as you, you do not feel alone. It is therefore particularly important to show the wide variety of people who are committed to climate protection.
 - Climate communication is scaling up with a different side of the same story
 - Attention has risen. Sustaining this momentum is one of the most important tasks in climate communication.

¹ <https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/impacts-climate-change-one-point-five-degrees-two-degrees/>