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Creative Climate: A global ten-year communications, research and learning project about environmental change

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The next ten years have been described by influential science and policy figures as ‘the most important in human history’. Many believe that the actions taken will decide whether we catastrophically change the atmosphere and eradicate our fellow species or find an alternative, less-damaging development path. But communications and public engagement initiatives have tended to focus on near term impacts or debates – whether they emphasise hazards, or trumpet ‘solutions’. There are signs of diminishing returns on communications and public engagement efforts, and serious obstacles to engaging around 40% of publics in e.g. the US and the UK. The Creative Climate web project takes a new approach, inviting people to see humanity’s intellectual and practical journey with these issues as an inspiring, dynamic and unfolding story.

We are inviting people to join us in building a huge living archive of experiences and ideas that respond to these issues. The website will collect thoughts and stories from doorstep to workplace, from lab to garden; from international conference to community meeting – from all over the world. The body of diaries lie at the core of the project, but these are supplemented by the offer of free online learning resources and broadcast-quality audio and video materials. The project is experimental in terms of its scope, its approach to environmental communications and debate and in its use of media. It works with formal partners, including the BBC, yet also makes the most of the opportunities for user generated content to create a rich multimedia resource that can support research, learning and engagement. The design of the project is informed by environmental social science and communications research, and by an awareness of the unfolding potential of Internet based communications to support social change. It is also intended that the Creative Climate platform will develop so as to serve researchers by offering an open resource of qualitative time-series data about how environmental change issues are understood.

This paper will outline some of the characteristics of existing patterns of public engagement and summarize critiques. It will consider how Creative Climate seeks to respond to these, and also reflect on its side-benefits as a long-term media laboratory that plays with the distinctive qualities of the web as a publishing medium. We conclude by suggesting that this experiment may prove to be instrumentally valuable in accelerating public engagement and action precisely because it does not set out to do so.

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