

MEDIA IMPACT FUNDERS

Crafting High Impact Environmental Media

On November 5, 2015 at Boulder, Colorado's [eTown Hall](#), [Media Impact Funders](#) (MIF) and [Vulcan Productions](#) joined forces to assemble top documentarians, journalism outlets and funders focused on producing media about the pressing issue of climate change. The day's speakers honed in on questions of how to assess whether productions are moving audiences and policymakers to action, and how to best collaborate more effectively.

MIF Executive Director Vince Stehle and Hilary Sparrow, Vulcan Productions' senior supervising producer, set the agenda for the day and welcomed environmental expert Spencer Reeder to reflect on the current state of the climate change debate.

Reeder, who advised the former governor of Washington on climate policy, and currently runs Vulcan's philanthropic arm focused on climate, noted that scientific analyses of environmental issues often fail to convince audiences. Rather than a question of scientific literacy, he suggested, perhaps the issue is one of conflicting values. There are complexities in the system that make communicating about climate change difficult. Scientists are not always the best communicators, except in cases where the evidence is "unassailable." Even so, facts fail to move. Instead, "haunting images, analogy, metaphor might be more evocative." For example, the equivalent of 940,000 Empire State Buildings is disappearing in glacial ice every year.

It's also important to make issues relevant to people, to "connect the dots and show people how things link together, to emphasize proximity of the issue." Polls show that people care about environmental issues, but they care about other issues with more intensity. What's more, audiences on the left and the right have different narratives. On the one hand, there's a belief that humans need to fundamentally alter the way we engage with the planet, particularly energy (more of a cautionary view). On the other, there's an argument that we don't need to change quality of life, we need to change how we use energy through innovation (some find this message more hopeful).

Vulcan looks at root causes, explained Reeder: energy consumption in the U.S. is significant. When you add on emissions from coal deposits in Wyoming and Montana, it eclipses global emissions. Consumption of fossil fuels globally is going up and up, despite decades of knowledge. Vulcan is laser-focused on trying to tackle this problem.

Defining Impact: What's Working in Climate Communications

David Fenton, founder of [Fenton Communications](#) and Jeff Horowitz, founder of [Avoided Deforestation Partners](#) and executive producer of environmental documentary [Time to Choose](#), stepped up to bat to consider successes and failures in environmental campaigns.

Horowitz noted that he's worked on both a television series, [Years of Living Dangerously](#), and a major new film, [Time to Choose](#), which will "really emphasize solutions." It's important to help "highlight the fact that it's not all gloom and doom," he said.

The target for this film is the climate debate in Paris (taking place just after this meeting) where the [Time to Choose](#) team has a seat at the table. Their goal is to end deforestation, using media as a vehicle to tell these stories. People working on the ground "consider us air cover," Horowitz said,

giving them fortitude to keep on doing what they are doing. While box office successes matter, the “real benefit I see day-to-day is how many times clips are used, quoted, and how convincing they are.”

Much of the important work happens behind the scenes, he suggested. In the work on deforestation, he helped to assemble CEOs of Fortune 500 countries. The head of Unilever — the largest buyer of palm oil — realized he had the obligation to not buy palm oil from deforested lands. “Together we convinced the entire Consumer Goods Forum to avoid deforestation,” said Horowitz. “This is not a front-page headline,” but in environmental media, “we can tell these stories.”

Fenton challenged Reeder’s juxtaposition of scientific literacy vs. values. “We have to do science education in a way that appeals to different people’s value systems,” he said. “You have to be scientifically rigorous — it is unethical not to be. Synthesizing scientific information in ethical and accurate ways is difficult, but it can be done.”

Journalism is actually better on this than it used to be, he suggested, but it’s not enough. Journalism does not have the impact it used to by itself. The Pope has helped the debate. The worst awareness of this issue, however, is here in this country: “This country is holding back the world,” Fenton said. “We can’t get 51 senators to pass a nonbinding resolution acknowledging that humans are changing the climate... the rest of the world sees that U.S. won’t do anything so ‘Why should we?’ ”

While many Americans believe climate change is happening, fewer believe it’s due to human activity, and it’s not high on the list of things they care about. “We haven’t been able to communicate repeatedly and effectively: What’s our simple message? We don’t have it. What’s our simple visualization? We don’t have it. What’s our simple message about how to solve this that we repeat intentionally all the time? We don’t have it. Who are our well-known spokespeople? We only have one, and he doesn’t work for everybody. All of these films, media communications activities, have to add up into a campaign,” said Fenton. “Separated, isolated activities don’t work.”

What’s more, he continued, conservative media in a fragmented media universe is “never pierced with information about this issue.” Activists bemoan this, but don’t do anything to change it. “How much do you think it costs to buy a 30 second ad on Fox News in Washington DC? The answer is \$250. The reason we don’t do things like this is not because we can’t afford it, but because it’s not in our DNA. But we’re up against very sinister marketing forces, and believe me, it’s in theirs.”

“Our message has been too complicated,” he said. “We have to make it simple and easy. It’s cheaper to go to solar and wind. We have to get away from doom and gloom and get onto positive messages.” There are Republican thought leaders on this issue, “and they are invisible. Politicians are always last to come on board, you have to prove to them that it’s safe to say things.”

Understanding the Impact of *Chasing Ice*.

Jeff Orlowski of [Exposure Labs](#) spoke about how documentary film [Chasing Ice](#) tracked the massive loss of glaciers and influenced the opinion of both the public and policymakers.

Orlowski’s original intention “wasn’t to make a film; it was to follow James Balog around and go on amazing photographic expeditions to beautiful places.” He did not have funding, experience, or know-how on how to do a feature film, and did not want to make an explicit documentary on climate change. Instead, the focus was on Balog’s adventures while trying to capture melting glaciers in the face of daunting personal, technical and environmental odds.

However, when the film came out, “we saw that it was striking a chord with audiences,” said Orlowski. The production team focused on supporting the theatrical campaign in a unique way—by offering free tickets to groups across the country. The question was how to get past skeptics when

there is such a big barrier to entry. Their strategy assumed that if the film made an impact on the people who saw it for free, their call to action would be to “pay it forward and take the message farther and wider.” The film stayed longer in cities with this program.

There is a spectrum of how people feel about climate change, he said. The “disengaged” category is the “sweet spot”—these people have heard the phrase, but don’t really know anything about it. If you can get the information to them, they come on board very quickly. When the team screened the film with no Q&A, there was a shifting about 37.5% from “skeptical to engaged.” While this was a small data set and anecdotal, it was still meaningful. The team “made a conscious effort to not include calls to action, in part because different groups are ready for different calls to action, and in part because it’s difficult to pin down individual actions.” Not only can everyone not afford solar panels, but the cumulative effect of individual actions is not enough. “We need political change,” he said.

As a result, the *Chasing Ice* team decided to do an experiment funded in large part by the [Kendeda Fund](#). They identified Congressman Pat Tiberi as a climate skeptic in a purple district in a purple state, and saturated the community with *Chasing Ice* for three months—reaching out to 10,000 people, giving out 7,000 DVDs, hosting screenings in schools, churches, Boy Scout meetings, and more. They tried to get to “atypical messengers,” and instead of asking people to write a petition, leveraged social media by having constituents write a message and tag Tiberi on social media (See [dearcongressmantiberi.com](#).) After six weeks, the Congressman acknowledged climate change was real. The only direction they gave people: do not attack or insult. “Not a single negative message was written,” Orłowski noted. “That political neutrality allowed us to reach more people.”

Currently, Exposure Labs is producing a new film on oceans, which are at the forefront of climate change. Working with team founded by a man with an advertising background who is now using technology to document underwater changes, they are capturing the declining state of coral—the habitat for a quarter of ocean life. The oceans have lost 40 percent of coral to bleaching in the last 35 years; the rest will collapse in next 35 years. “This is a communications problem, not a science problem,” he said.

The team is aiming for a Fall 2016 to early-2017 release, and they are still thinking through distribution strategies—“a lot of traditional methods don’t meet our impact goals.” Their idea is to develop another pilot that’s scalable and packageable, and to make the content easily accessible on a mobile device. They will continue to focus on curated screening events in “sweet spot” communities identified as pressure points. “If we can do well in five districts, we will take it to the next 10,” he said. “We don’t need to reach all members of Congress, we just need to get to a tipping point.”

Balog, who was in the audience, noted, “it’s important to acknowledge that a lot of this work is coming from powerful personal stories. We didn’t do this film to be an advertising piece for climate change, we did it because I wanted to bear witness to what was happening.”

Orłowski agreed that there is a “separation between church and state” between the film itself and the way it’s distributed with impact goals. “This is not a scenario for healthy debate like other issues,” he said. “It’s an issue of science versus falsehoods.”

Building Climate Awareness Over Generations

[National Geographic’s](#) Executive Environmental Editor Dennis Dimick and Executive Editor for Maps, Graphics, and Art Kaitlin Yarnall spoke about the organization’s long-term strategies for covering climate shifts. Their challenge: to capture the passion of storytelling and make the issue vivid.

Starting in 2004, the magazine began running a series of cover and feature stories on global warming. In 2007, the focus was fossil fuels, which allowed them to work with [the Aspen Institute](#) for five years to establish an environmental forum and publish additional coverage on energy issues. In 2012, they turned their attention to the multiple dimensions of extreme weather, and connections between weather changes and climate change. A story on hydrofracking in North Dakota pointed out the dangers of an increasingly aggressive extraction industry.

The magazine's 125th anniversary provided the team with an opportunity to create a multiplatform production and exhibit on the power of photography to bear witness. Balog's [Extreme Ice Survey](#)—the project documented in *Chasing Ice*—was a centerpiece of this ambitious effort.

National Geographic is “slow media in a fast world,” said Dimick. The goal is to be “be persistent and relentless.” The [November 2015 issue](#) tackles global warming head-on, with a cover line of “Cool it.”

“We try to help make connections for people,” he said—e.g. how coal in the U.S., China and India pose similar problems. “We are in the business of explaining: here’s the problem,” he said, and presenting solutions, in this case for cutting emissions. [Germany was a core story](#) in the issue: an example of a Western industrialized country trying to walk away from coal. The issue also [painted a picture of what’s possible](#): Can you imagine what America would look like with a renewable future? Also, in the developing world: “How do you bring light to those who don’t have any?”

“We wanted to take a step back and take a look about what we know about the world,” he said. It began in 1968 when humans first saw pictures of the earth from space, which “changed the way we look and think about the earth. Satellites show us new images that help us understand carbon. Sensors on airplanes give us a picture of the earth breathing. We hope to raise awareness amongst decision-makers to put these sensors on satellites to create a real-time picture of the Earth’s biosphere.”

As an organization, they had a realization that the world had been explored, Dimick explained. “There was a paucity of places you could go take pictures of and come back and report on. In order to remain relevant, we needed to help paint a picture of the role of the human condition on this planet.”

The strategy has paid dividends in reader response: they have surveyed subscribers and found that 30 percent of *National Geographic’s* top stories were related to climate and energy.

Yarnall spoke about the many ways in which *National Geographic* taps visual tools to bring complex topics home to readers. How does the team define the impact of their work? “We think first and foremost about readers, but we are happy when it goes bigger and broader,” she said, citing the example of President Obama mentioning their [atlas’s reflection of shrinking ice](#) when talking about his energy plan.

While *National Geographic* is known for photography, “before we had photos we had maps and graphics,” she said. There is so much data now, and it’s hard for people to understand. Evidence paired with photographs makes an impact, as in the case of [the fracking story in North Dakota](#)—a local story with global implications. The design team used infographics and images to explain processes photographers can’t actually capture, such as fracking underground. The graphics generated interesting responses: one the one hand from engineers, thanking them for explaining what they do, and from the other side, people astonished by this invasive process.

Yarnall also noted the popularity of the interactive feature [A Blueprint for Carbon Free America](#). “People are spending a lot of time on site,” she said, exploring how their states’ energy mix would look in a transition to renewal energy. By using projected data, *National Geographic* designers can

help readers visualize the consequences of various shifts—for example, what the world would look like if all the ice melted. They can also synthesize the outcomes of “wild weather events,” into one spread, such as the global movement of environmental migrants in the Philippines. On climate issues, “There is a steady drumbeat but we have to have spikes and peaks and loud drum parts like a good symphony.”

Foldout maps and posters have been a staple supplement for magazine subscribers — a map titled [Amazonia: Vital and Fragile](#) provides a “combination of wonder and worry,” she said. The goal is to “show what’s at stake... but make it beautiful.” The poster is printed in three languages, and will be going into every school in Brazil. On the other side, it talks about the impact of oil and gas, but nowhere does it say “climate change.” A [related interactive](#) examines how damage to the region threatens its ability to clean carbon from the atmosphere. [Educational resources](#) for this project have received support from [the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#) and [the Inter-American Development Bank](#).

National Geographic subscriber numbers are constantly changing. “Globally, every time we add a new language, things shift,” noted Dimick. “The average age is somewhere in the 50s for print, about 10 years younger for digital. The question of online metrics is emerging. The digital audience is vastly different from print.” The production team is now consciously building out the site and related resources to be available on mobile to reach out to other audiences.

Spotlights: *eTown* and *To the Arctic*

Stehle introduced two quick talks on other environmental media projects:

- The event was taking place at eTown Hall, a unique Boulder venue that serves as a production studio and performance space for the [eTown](#) radio show, which combines music with interviews and awards that recognize listener-nominated people noted for their environmental “eCheivements.” Boulder local Phil Taylor, a fellow with Duke University and the [Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research](#) at the University of Colorado, appeared on the show, and spoke briefly about his [efforts to develop sustainable feed for animals](#) to replace the resource-intensive use of soybeans.
- John Lamson, the executive vice president of [Resource Media](#), spoke about the difficulties that funders can have in supporting media campaigns. “This is a story about a small family foundation’s efforts to play in the big media funding leagues,” he said. [The Champion Foundation](#) put in a \$2 million program related investment for production of [To the Arctic](#), and got \$2 million back. The film earned about \$14.5 million in gross receipts while running, and played in 55 IMAX theaters at high water mark in spring 2012. This was “a big gamble” for the Champion Foundation, and they learned about the “fundamental importance of a good entertainment lawyer to help them do it.” The foundation lost creative input largely once Warner Brothers Pictures came in, he said. They’d hoped to invest in a “gut-punching documentary,” but after discussions about content and exposure and education versus entertainment, they ended up with “a very nice story about polar bears with amazing cinematography.” Their lesson: it was a good film, but not focused on conservation and advocacy goals, which are “Champion’s lifeblood.” A residual benefit of this investment: Last year Champion launched a 501c4 advocacy organization to bring a “forceful combination of philanthropy and advocacy—You will see them roaming the halls of power along with grantees.” They now have a “real calling card that shows they mean business with their advocacy.” If they make such an investment again, they’ll ensure that there are clear links to action, organizing on the ground, and policy objectives, he noted.

Looking Forward: The Global Release of *Racing Extinction*

Nick Forster of eTown moderated this panel featuring several perspectives on the December 2nd, 2015 global release of [Racing Extinction](#) on the Discovery Channel. Speakers for this session included:

- Olivia Ahnemann, Producer, [Oceanic Preservation Society](#)
- Jon Bardin, Director of Documentaries and Specials, [Discovery Channel](#)
- Ted Richane, Director of Engagement and Impact, [Vulcan Productions](#)
- Hilary Sparrow, Senior Supervising Producer, Vulcan Productions

Ahnemann explained that director Louis Psihoyos set out to make this film because he felt it was “the most important story of our time.” The production team had previously made an Oscar-winning film called [The Cove](#), which was limited in geographic scope and had a clear “enemy.” Their challenge now was to “tell a story that is global, and the enemy is us—we are the ones destroying the planet.”

“We knew we had to connect people emotionally, but also leave them with a sense of hope,” she said “After *The Cove*, we realized we had made a bit of a horror film. After people saw the film they asked what they could do and we didn’t know what to tell them. So this time we knew we had to have action items.”

Distribution was also a major challenge: How do you get the film seen? “Film festivals tend to be preaching to the choir. How do you get a film like this to connect people to this material?” Their solution was a combination of “creating an emotional film that’s inspiring with having a broadcast partner who can get the eyeballs that we need, plus having the power of Vulcan Productions, who has the resources to dedicate to this type of project.”

People ask, “Why are you making such a big investment in this film?” said Bardin. The answer is: “How could we not?”

The documentaries team is new at Discovery, part of an overhaul of the entire network. When they started, he explained, they did a deep dive into “What does Discovery mean to people?” The answers were about [Planet Earth](#) and [Walking with Dinosaurs](#). “We realized quickly we have to go back to that brand,” and *Racing Extinction* was a “no-brainer.”

Discovery is in 220 countries and territories around the world, which makes for an incredible potential audience. And while the channel has a history of spreading content around the world, there has never been such a concerted effort to take one piece of content and really launch a coordinated global event. On December 2, the channel launched *Racing Extinction* as a series of primetime broadcasts, starting in New Zealand and spreading around the world over 24 hours.

Previously, the [Skyscraper Live](#) event was a global event and it brought “a huge audience,” Bardin said. However, *Racing Extinction* aired in primetime everywhere. In the U.S., Discovery is a paid channel but in other countries, especially in the developing world, it’s free to air.

Richane observed that Discovery brings amazing production and promotion skills to the table. “Documentary filmmakers often don’t know how to make a [promotional] spot, because they don’t know how to reach people. From an impact perspective, the views generated led to action.” The production team hosted an unprecedented [projection event](#) on the Empire State Building, and put up a petition in conjunction with Facebook supporting President Obama’s action on trade.

"I won't lie, it has been a difficult challenge: there is no one solution," says Richane. *The Cove* was about one problem with a clear solution, but "every decision we make, everything we eat, every single thing we do is related to the issues in this film ... We want people to be taking action against a set of very definable objectives."

"We are looking at the long game," said Sparrow. Since *The Cove*, dolphin hunting has been reduced. Then *Blackfish* came along and had another set of impacts. "Right now we are truly focused on this audience-building movement." The combination of Vulcan Productions and Vulcan Philanthropy, leveraging partnership with Discovery, is a unique one.

The *Racing Extinction* broadcast presented "a great opportunity to connect with Paris talks and pressure world leaders," as Richane noted. In addition, they put together "tools for people to use to advocate, as well as five-day challenges that people can do to change the way that they eat, and make other changes in their lives." A campaign called "[Start with 1 Thing](#)" is an umbrella initiative that acknowledges there isn't just one thing viewers can do, and that what you can do depends on who you are, where you are, etc.: "If you are someone who is new to this, you can start with baby steps."

By emphasizing the adventure aspect of the film, Discovery aimed to appeal to the channel's core viewers, who might not otherwise be consuming media on climate change issues. The trick is making a film that's entertaining, leverages narrative storytelling techniques and the appeal of covert investigative reporting, and still offers messages about key issues.

Forster asked the group how they hoped to strike a balance "between the long game and the desire to have measureability in their impact."

"The task is managing expectations," said Sparrow, "really laying out movement-building, audience building. We just passed an initiative in Washington banning the trade of endangered species. We can take this success story to other states."

"People on the stage here represent different entities with different perspectives," answered Richane, "but at the end of the day we all align so that we can have the biggest maximum reach."

"We don't kid ourselves that all endangered species trading will stop," said Bardin. "We want to maximize impact on the broadcast but we can't have our digital team focused on *Racing Extinction* on the next five years. Whose responsibility is that to carry that out? Vulcan is fulfilling a very important role, but who has that responsibility in the culture?"

It's hard to predict what long-term future engagement will look like. "From a producer and director standpoint it's easier to get the money to fund the film than to fund the long tail," said Sparrow. "I would ask funders to consider the value of that."

The campaign will include a large education and curriculum component. "When making this film we constantly asked ourselves: 'What is the call to action? How can we have people tap into their own talents and apply them to this problem? How do we communicate with people and motivate them to do this?'" said Ahnemann.

"What we usually want to do is say, 'What problem are we trying to solve?' Richane explained. "Sometimes people say, 'I want to do X.' When people don't know, we usually connect with people who are working in the field who know the various actions that will help solve the problems. Sometimes the action steps are worthless because it's not something an audience member is going to do. It's not an exact science. Big NGOs are hit all the time with, 'Can you help promote my movie?' But when you say, 'We want to position this film to help you and the movement. What can we do?' instead, that will open up the floodgates."

While *Racing Extinction* planned to have a presence in Paris, “every NGO sees it as their moment in the sun and every film wants to be seen.” The team emphasized the importance of a successful broadcast: “it’s more important than anything we could have done in Paris.”

Bardin noted that members of the documentaries team are new to the ad-supported world. “There has been no pushback on this film internally,” he said. “In the U.S. we are doing a limited commercial premier. We have a desire to do this type of programming on all of our networks.”

Richane noted that Discovery put out new content every day for a month leading up to the broadcast. “It’s been a great way to build out our community on social, a great lesson on building momentum toward a broadcast.”

“Being inside this huge company comes with a lot of resources,” Bardin observed. “An incredible amount of content is being generated. The ability to touch people with these stories in their normal feed—“I don’t think you can say how powerful this kind of unexpected media hit is.”

“You can’t underestimate the value of reaching a broader demographic,” Forster concluded.

Time to Choose

Before moving on to discussions about journalism collaboration, we had an opportunity to preview a trailer from [Time to Choose](#), a powerful new climate change film from Oscar-winning filmmaker Charles Ferguson.

Reporting for Change: Collaborations in Journalism

While the *Racing Extinction* campaign represents a groundbreaking collaboration around the release of a documentary, journalists have also been working around the clock to collaborate on environmental and climate coverage. Stehle moderated a session examining two key efforts: [Climate Desk](#) and [The Media Consortium](#)’s experiments in collaborative reporting.

[Mother Jones](#) Publisher Steve Katz and Matt Grisafi, the director of marketing and business Development at [Grist](#), spoke about the evolution and successes of the [Climate Desk](#).

Mother Jones helped to found Climate Desk in 2009, Katz explained. One piece of the impact puzzle that’s often overlooked is how change operates in journalism itself. The initiative was designed to allow partner outlets to write from their own area of expertise and then share content. The collapse of the cap-and-trade agreement looked like it’d be a watershed moment; *Mother Jones*, *Grist*, and others sat down and said, “Let’s report on winners and losers, etc.,” he said. There was a peak in coverage of climate change in 2009 and then it plummeted—projected treaties didn’t happen, so they asked themselves what they could do. They decided that journalism’s role could be to “show places where change was happening below the radar at the local and regional levels”—they “believed that the time would come for a legitimate debate at national/global level.”

The job of Climate Desk reporters was to “document the story in as broad, diverse and interesting a way as they could.” They first applied a “magazine model on a digital platform.” Katz explained: “Get editors together, publish a thing, and then thing would be done.” However, they realized it was not working, and reinvented their approach to one that was digital-first: Video-based, moving material out through partnership via web, mobile, and social.

This represented a profound reinvention of the techniques that they were using. The reporters and editors wanted to tell an overarching climate story about changes in ways of life, to show new ways

of doing journalism, and do it in a way that moved beyond the traditional environmental choir. A small Climate Desk core reporting team in DC and NYC has also produced a body of work with a total potential audience of 250 million-plus. The associated podcast, [Inquiring Minds](#), boasts 30,000 downloads per week. In addition to daily full-content sharing designed to find character-driven local stories and pull them forward into policy consequences, they've produced live events.

The initiative is fully collaborative—all content is branded with both “Climate Desk” and the partner source. An email goes out every day offering up free, shared content, designed to appeal to non-specialist audiences. The initiative extends each partner’s reach to an audience that they would not touch, fulfills editorial needs for high-quality content, and shows other editors how to do a good story on climate. It has grown steadily, Katz said—partners are now sharing more stories per year; more than doubled in last two years. New partners such as *Wired*, *The Guardian* and the Huffington Post have expanded the project’s footprint significantly. They are expecting a big jump with COP 21 coverage.

Grisafi spoke about the experience of participating in the Climate Desk collaboration from the perspective of *Grist*, an online outlet that aims to be the “*Colbert Report* of climate change,” leveraging a sense of humor to make environmental issues more accessible to a younger audience. *Grist* started as an email newsletter, and now reaches two million monthly readers, 40 percent of whom are aged 18-34. Readers take action on what they read in *Grist*, said Grisafi. Climate Desk distribution allows them to extend their reach to new audiences—for example a HuffPost link to a *Grist* piece helped to make it their eighth most popular story this year, with readers spending more than two minutes above average on the page.

Sharing news coverage has also gives them the capacity to focus on deeper dives and alternative storytelling methods because the topic is already covered by partners. *Grist* staff has begun spending more time on short explainer videos, leveraging also a fellows program for early-career journalists for six months. These fellows “have gone onto greater things,” he said.

Katz explained that the Climate Desk has created a raft of post-Paris coverage that does not ride on the success or failure of meetings. The challenge is to maintain funder interest in a project like this over time. One “rockstar” example of a publication that has put climate at the center is [The Guardian](#). They determined that the environmental beat was not effectively covered by the *Times*, and made a massive investment in a U.S. bureau as a result. Collaboration is not always symmetrical; commercial partners such as *Vox* and *Fusion* run Climate Desk stories, but they won’t make their content available for free. Funding is central to being able to bring content to other bigger outlets in this way.

John Schwartz, the director and founder of [Voqal](#) spoke about another effort to leverage partnerships among independent reporting outlets in order to have a greater impact on issues. Motivated by a desire to better understand media impact, Voqal has worked with the [Robert W. Deutsch Foundation](#) and individual donors to support a series of reporting experiments conducted by members of [The Media Consortium](#) — an international network of more than 70 leading independent progressive journalism organizations. TMC recruited 27 of these outlets to coordinate reporting on a set of hot topics, including abortion, child refugees, education privatization, climate change, migration, GMOs and more, and worked with analytics firm [Crimson Hexagon](#) to track corresponding social media responses.

While it can be “hard to get unruly media producers to participate in experimental protocols,” Schwartz observed, the group has managed to set up a process that examines the responses of a “control” group (i.e., previous to the coverage) and a “treated” group (i.e., readers exposed to the coverage.) Crimson Hexagon devised an algorithm based on 18 months of Twitter feed observation that isolates how the coverage drives conversation, by “trying to detect experimental signals of

changes caused by coverage against natural noise.” While the experiment is still ongoing, they found that not only did pro-immigration tweets increase almost 60 percent during the period studied, but during the 12 days that followed the “treatment date,” anti-immigrant tweets fell below the predicted level. To date they have conducted 21 different experiments, and have seen a 32 percent increase of progressive on-topic tweets in treatment periods versus control periods.

Using Communications Strategies to Ensure that Stories Drive Impact

[Frank](#) is a community of public interest communicators based at the University of Florida. Annie Neimand, Frank’s executive editor and Ann Christiano, the Frank Karel Chair in Public Interest Communications at the College of Journalism and Communication, offered insights into the best strategies for addressing environmental issues.

Niemand presented an array of findings on the science of communication—why people avoid or deny evidence and “what the research says we can do about it.” She noted that while 40 percent of adults worldwide have never heard of climate change, most people in the U.S. are aware of it. However, while 90 percent of Democrats believe it is caused by human actions, only 59 percent of Republicans believe this.

What motivates people to deny or avoid such information? Researchers have identified three reasons:

- People avoid information that makes them change behavior
- People avoid information that makes them feel bad
- People avoid information that challenges their beliefs

“You know you have to change hearts to inspire empathy and action. You also have to speak to them rationally,” she said. “When we talk about reaching heads and hearts, we are really talking about identities. It is commonly assumed that more information about climate change will lead to less polarization. Researchers found it doesn’t have to do with knowledge, but more with identity. People deny science if it is in their best interest to do so. As communicators, we should create methods that don’t threaten sense of self, and use messages and messengers that resonate with specific communities.”

Research suggests that liberals and conservatives see things differently, said Niemand. “Liberals are more concerned with protection from harm, conservatives are more concerned with respect for authority, respect for the sacred.” Conservative voters who are more religious are more likely to turn to religious leaders and neighbors for climate change information. Tapping into community is another effective strategy—one experiment showed that emphasizing local impacts of climate change increases likelihood of making climate change a priority.

“The end goal isn’t the acceptance of information. The more important goal is to move people to action. Most Americans believe climate change is real, but few take action,” she said. This is exacerbated by a conflict in prioritizing long-term over short-term gain, and by “psychic numbing.” It is more effective to demonstrate the impact of a particular issue on a single person than to try to engage viewers in the plight of a more abstract crowd. For example, the recent image of a Syrian refugee child washed ashore mobilized a notable response.

What is useful for eliciting emotion? Stories—particularly those that tell the plight of an individual. “Media that produces a ‘lump in the throat reaction’ can energize people—but then people need a clear path with tangible steps. They get overwhelmed with huge problems and vague goals.”

Christiano spoke about her own journey from working at a foundation to helping to found the Frank program. She defined “public interest communication” as “the development and implementation of science-based, planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization.”

She outlined the five habits of successful campaigns:

- **Tell stories like you mean it** (evoke a physical response, inspire audiences to empathize with protagonists)
- **Be visual** (The part of the brain that controls language and the part that controls emotion are not connected, but the part that controls visuals is connected to emotion—“we feel in pictures.”)
- **Figure out who your audience is and connect with their values.** (No more “raising awareness.” Example: Brazilian organ donation through sports fans—would have failed without attachment to fandom.)
- **Use the full palate of emotion.** (Conservative and liberal brains are hardwired differently, with different physiology. “Biology, not reason, might be why people of different political orientations see threats differently.”)
- **Create a call to action that is actually a call to adventure.** (Example: [Truth campaign](#) reduced youth smoking rate to 9%. “Let’s be the generation that ends smoking forever.”)

The power of bringing these five parts together is “like a flame with gasoline on it,” she said “That’s the opportunity that exists for us in this moment.”

Discussion: Conclusions and Next Steps

We closed the day with a discussion about conclusions and next steps led by David Fenton and Jeff Horowitz.

Horowitz noted that there is “clearly a tremendous amount of talent in the room when it comes to crafting media.” At one point documentary film was not so great, now it’s all “really, really good.” However, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. “How do we move the dial? What are we missing?” Most importantly, he said, “If we don’t have the support in terms of dollars, then we really are dead in the water.”

Fenton pointed out that there is a lot of money in the climate movement, but very little of it goes to communication. “We don’t really lack a supply of policy, we lack a demand. We need to increase that pot.” If you look at traditional NGOs, they may spend about two percent of their budgets on non-fundraising communications.

“It’s a tough subject,” he said. “This is the most dramatic story that the human race has faced: Are we going to let the human race go extinct and take 2/3 of other species with us?” Or, to put it another way, “Are we going to let 12 oil and gas companies decide the fate of the planet?”

Fenton recommended the book *Don’t Even Think About It* by George Marshall, which shows that “the same mental pathways we use to think about climate change are the ones we use to think about death and dying—and who really wants to think about that?” The frame of the story affects emotional response.

He added that “There are lots of people who would like to help with this and we don’t make it easy for them, which is crazy. We need more funding for media, and not just documentary. How should we do it?”

“What we need to do with storytelling is bring out a feeling equivalent to the nation feeling under attack by a foreign power,” Fenton said. “At a certain point the country will realize this and come together.”