

▶ COVID-19 AND CLIMATE CHANGE: TURNING APATHY, ANXIETY, AND ANGER INTO ACTION

We are living through uncertain times. COVID-19 and climate change both represent collective problems where individual action must occur universally for the threat to disappear. Although COVID-19 is more easily recognized as an immediate crisis, seeing climate change as a future problem instead of an urgent one is dangerous. Massive wildfires, increasingly violent storms, flooding, drought, heat waves, food insecurity, water shortages, health impacts of pollution and beyond pose huge challenges to fragile economic and healthcare systems. These challenges will grow in intensity and frequency as climate change worsens. While individuals may be able to take steps to protect themselves from a virus, there is little ability for individuals to quarantine themselves away from the effects of climate change. With both problems requiring urgent action, some public policy researchers have shifted attention to finding ways to address COVID-19 and climate change through the same measures. However, the answers have not been so clear.

It is possible that a focus on improving health may indirectly foster new values around the environment. Whether referring to COVID-19 or climate change, the root of both problems is a lack of attention placed in our political and economic systems to seeing ourselves (humans) as part of nature. The theory of queer ecology argues that if we are to solve the climate change crisis, the line between society and nature must be blurred in our conception of reality. This thought transition requires letting go of the idea of nature as pristine and uncontaminated through shattering essentialized notions about the “fantasy Nature that never really existed” (Morton 2010, 273). Queer ecology argues that the human/non-human boundary is

increasingly difficult to define. Morton writes, “I propose that life-forms constitute a mesh, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment.”¹

Policy measures to address COVID-19 and climate change need to be grounded in a reality that sees both crises rooted in the same (false) binary division between society and nature, while also recognizing shared barriers to citizen involvement in solving the two collective problems: apathy, anxiety and anger. Public policy researchers need to find meaningful ways to engage with youth members of the public who are facing fears over an uncertain future. Recent work on youth participatory action research found that providing youth with the power, permission, and support to investigate research questions that were important to them increased their interest in contributing to policy solutions.² As the provinces of Saskatchewan, Ontario and New Brunswick consider future deployment of small modular reactors (SMRs), elevating the diverse voices of youth from Northern and Southern communities about their needs and hopes for the future of energy is of vital importance. Eco-anxiety is a growing concern for youth everywhere, yet when economic disparities exist among youth from different locations or cultures, these inequities amplify the need to bring youth into shared conversations about climate change to help foster transformation.

Implementing solutions to collective problems requires inspiring citizens to act. Rommetveit et al. argue, “Problems to engage and mobilise populations for the sake of

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sustainability and change may be more closely related than commonly recognised to policies in which access to participate in the search for solutions are withheld.”³ Adding to this is the challenge of mobilizing people to engage with a problem that is too difficult for many to face. When it comes to thinking about wicked problems like climate change, there is a tendency for “emotional numbness” and a “finite pool of worry” to cause apathy instead of action.⁴ This “other kind of climate denialism”⁵ presents a dangerous reality that limits the ability of policymakers to address the worsening situation.

COVID-19 has exemplified that risk perceptions among the public on the same threat reflect a multiplicity of differences rather than uniformity or binary polarization. This is certainly the case with risk perceptions



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surrounding climate change as well. Increasingly, the need for effective public engagement surrounding energy policy decisions has been recognized as a means of addressing division over options. However, it is important that the process of engagement does not worsen or reinforce polarization and damage trust in policy makers. Trust follows the asymmetry principle in that it is slow and effortful to build but quick to erode.⁶ Sharing of information in a cyclical manner where the various publics are not simply informed but rather are brought into the decision-making process as stakeholders is essential.⁷

When handled with care, public engagement can help navigate conflict over how to proceed in the face of a crisis without debate or silence taking over. Yet it is necessary to ask, has the pandemic reinforced close-mindedness and division in our communities? Has the urgency required to respond to COVID-19 fueled binary divisions among citizens who hold differing opinions about what actions should be taken? Furthermore, how has an increased reliance on social media as we socially distance amplified misinformation and anger?

While the world is indeed a heavy place as we face two major threats to human existence,

finding ways to navigate this bumpy road together is key. Decision-making will be messy and uncomfortable, and mistakes will be made, yet inaction is not an option. If we can work together to channel apathy, anxiety, and anger into resiliency and action, we have every reason to be hopeful for a better world to emerge from this time of grief and uncertainty. Our future is not written yet, and we are all collective authors of how that story will unfold.

References

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⁵ <https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/the-other-kind-of-climate-denialism>

⁶ Kim, Younghwan, Wonjoon Kim, Minki Kim. 2014. "An international comparative analysis of public acceptance of nuclear energy." *Energy Policy* 66: 475-483.

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