

Don't Even Think About It Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change

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Why This Book is Important

QUESTIONS

In 1942 the Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski gave eye witness testimony to the Supreme Court judge Felix Frankfurter of the clearing of the Warsaw Ghetto and the systematic murder of Polish Jews in the Belzec concentration camp. Listening to him, Frankfurter, himself a Jew, and one of the outstanding legal minds of his generation, replied- "I must be frank. I am unable to believe him". He added: "I did not say this young man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. There is a difference."

What explains our ability to separate what we know from what we believe, to put aside the things that seem too painful to accept? How is it possible, when presented with overwhelming evidence, even the evidence of our own eyes, that we can deliberately ignore something—while being entirely aware that this is what we are doing?

These questions have fascinated me for all the years I have been working on climate change¹. They are what drew me to write this book and to spend years speaking with the world's leading experts in psychology, economics, risk assessment, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and evolutionary psychology, not to mention hundreds of non-experts—ordinary people I have encountered on the way.

At each step in this journey, as I tried to understand how we make sense of this issue, I uncovered other intriguing anomalies and paradoxes demanding explanation:

- Why do the victims of flooding, drought, and severe storms become *less* willing to talk about climate change or even accept that it is real?
 - Why are people who say that climate change is too uncertain more easily convinced of the imminent dangers of terrorist attacks, meteorite strikes, or an alien invasion?
 - Why have scientists, normally the most trusted professionals in our society, become distrusted, hated, and the targets for violent abuse?
 - Why is America's most prestigious science museum telling seven million people a year that climate change is a natural cycle and that we can grow new organs to adapt to it?
 - Why are science fiction fans, of all people, so unwilling to imagine what the future might really be like?
 - Why does having children make people less concerned about climate change?
 - How did a rational policy negotiation become a debating slam to be won by the wittiest and most aggressive player?
 - Why can stories based on myths and lies become so compelling that a president prefers to take his climate science advice from a bestselling thriller writer rather than the National Academy of Sciences?
 - And why *is* an oil company so much more worried about the threats posed by its slippery floors than the threats posed by its products?

¹ Yes, climate is always changing, but here I am following the international legal definition as being "attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods".

Through asking these questions I have come to see climate change in an entirely new light: Not as a media battle of science versus vested interests or truth versus fiction, but as the ultimate challenge to our ability to make sense of the world around us. More than any other issue it exposes the deepest workings of our minds, and shows our extraordinary and innate talent for seeing only what we want to see and disregarding what we would prefer not to know.

I work for a small educational charity, advising other non-profits, governments, and businesses on how they can better talk about a subject that most people don't really want to talk about at all. I spend most of my working life with people very like myself- concerned, well informed, liberal minded environmentalists - so it was a pleasant surprise, while writing this book, to discover I often learned the most from the people who are entirely different from me.

Talking to Texan Tea Partiers led me to ask why we climate communicators have so singularly failed to connect with their concerns. Speaking to evangelical leaders made me question the boundaries between belief and knowledge. I have even enjoyed meeting the people whose life work, to which they apply great dedication and creativity, is to undermine my own life work.

So I do not seek to attack the people who do not believe in climate change. I am interested in how they reach those conclusions, and I am just as interested in how believers reach and hold theirs. I am convinced that the real answers to my questions do not lie in the things that drive us apart so much as in the things we all share: our common psychology, our perception of risk, and our deepest instincts to defend our family and tribe.

These ancient skills are not serving us well. In this book I argue that climate change contains none of the clear signals that we require to mobilize our inbuilt sense of threat and that it is remarkably and dangerously open to misinterpretation.

I find that everyone, experts and non-experts alike, converts climate change into stories that embody their own values, assumptions, and prejudices. I describe how these stories can come to take on a life of their own, following their own rules, evolving and gaining authority as they pass between people.

I suggest that the most pervasive narrative of all is the one that is not voiced: the collective social norm of silence. This response to climate change is all too similar to that other great taboo, death, and I suggest that they may have far more in common than we want to admit.

I argue that accepting climate change requires far more than reading the right books, watching the right documentaries or ticking off a checklist well meaning behaviors: It requires conviction, and this is difficult to form and even harder to maintain. It took me many years to reach my own personal conviction that climate change is real and a deadly serious threat to everything I hold dear. This is not easy knowledge to hold, and in my darker moments I feel a deep sense of dread. I too have learned to keep that worry on one side: knowing that the threat is real, yet actively choosing not to feel it.

So I have come to realize that I cannot answer my questions by looking too long at the thing that causes this anxiety. There are no graphs, data sets, or complex statistics in this book, and I leave all discussion of possible climate impacts until a final postscript at the very end. This is, I am certain, the right way around. In the end, all of the computer models, scientific predictions and economic scenarios are constructed around the most important and uncertain variable of all: whether our collective choice will be to accept or to deny what the science is telling us. And this, I hope you will find, is an endlessly disturbing, engrossing and intriguing question.