

**A Critical Analysis of the City of Calgary's use of Social Media
in the Climate Emergency Declaration**

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Abstract

Social media is a salient tactic in climate change communications. It has been widely studied to examine the best practices when used in climate risk communication and climate action generation in recent years. A case study by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising's Effectiveness Awards for their The People's Seat campaign, which is another climate change campaign provides insight into possible strategies to facilitate civic action. The City of Calgary's Climate Emergency Declaration gives way to the possibility of an increase in civic acceptance of the crisis, along with an increase in civic action around climate initiatives. A week after the declaration, the critical analysis of how the city can leverage social media as a tactic to communicate risks and generate action around climate change leads to a recommendation for the city's next steps.

Research Question

How can the City of Calgary leverage social media as a tactic to communicate risks and generate action around climate change?

On Nov. 15, 2021, the City of Calgary Council voted in favour of a climate emergency declaration (Smith, 2021). This vote came just weeks after COP26, the United Nations (UN) international climate conference. The COP26 focused on climate change action, with three guiding pillars: adaptation, mitigation and finance (Saier, 2021). The declaration also came days before a major climate crisis in the adjacent province of British Columbia, where the effects of climate change created devastating floods, destroyed roads, submerged communities and took lives (BBC, 2021). The timeliness of this declaration emphasizes the need for action around climate change. A common narrative around the climate crisis is the need for action rather than just awareness; Labby (2021) explains that many climate change experts and advocates say municipal emergency declarations “must be followed by measurable actions to ensure the move is not just a symbolic gesture” (para. 8). The mayor of Calgary hopes the declaration will emphasize the crisis and promote investment in Calgary by gaining respect from other national and international governments and businesses. While the government primarily targets other governments and energy investors, this paper focuses on civilians because they too can act in change.

Social media speaks to public audiences who require a less-scientific assessment of risk. According to Leiss and Powell (2004), “what the public want to hear is what those charged with the responsibility of risk management think ought to be done and why” (p. 222). It allows for the use of narratives, and casual message frames, which are persuasive in climate change communication (Ross & Rivers, 2019; Wong-Parodi & Feygina, 2021; Zhang & Pinto, 2021). With the City of Calgary’s goal to increase the acceptance of the Climate Emergency Declaration and generate civic action, social media’s saliency is examined as a communications tactic. To

fully understand the power of this tool, one must understand the players within social media, like message format, persuasion strategies, and audience differences. To ensure the proper implementation of social media as a tactic, the possible pitfalls are also considered. The awarded UN digital climate change campaign ‘The People’s Seat’ acts as a case study to examine key actors in successful social media campaigns that pertain to climate action.

Literature Review of Social Media Salience and Issues with Memes

The following literature review provides insights into social media communication’s best practices and pitfalls with a focus on memes. It begins with messages framing theory by Ross & Rivers (2019). Next, Wong-Parodi and Feygina (2021) examine the effective use of emotional narratives as persuasive techniques on various audiences which gives insight into how climate change campaigns can target different political groups. After the discussion of positive elements of social media, the review focuses on potential issues with specifically using memes to increase the acceptance of climate change risk, outlined by Zhang and Pinto (2021).

Saliency in social media

Memes are often examined as a message format in social media campaigns. Memes are potent, persuasive forms of communication, as Ross and Rivers (2019) explain “internet memes need to be seen not only as a simple online joke, but rather as a powerful form of media communication” (p. 992). They noted that an examination of message frames from either climate change skeptics or believers revealed that memes “either directly or ironically, establish a sense of power of one ideological position over another” (Ross & Rivers, 2019, p. 990). Memes require the creator to know its intertextuality and pop culture, along with how the audience will interpret varying templates and the messages that go along with it (p. 991). Ross and Rivers explain that “armed with this knowledge, the creators have been able to manipulate the text of

the memes to present their viewpoints in order to subvert and undermine the views of the opposition through their own user-generated frame with varying degrees of irony and humor” (p. 991). If successful, a meme could go beyond high reach and engagement which Ross and Rivers note are “other forms of activism, protest, or even to influencing voting choices that otherwise might not have emerged” (p. 992).

It has become common knowledge among professional communicators that within social channels are strong algorithms that divide liberals and conservatives. Understanding each group and their response to persuasive messages can guide future strategies in climate crisis communication. In Wong-Parodi and Feygina (2021), liberals and conservatives were studied to see the juxtaposition in the emotional narrative's role in them recognizing and acting on key factors of climate change: its proximity, that it is a product of humans, that it is real and worrisome, support of climate policy, and initiate steps that mitigate the effects of climate change. They found that stronger emotional responses to the narratives increased their recognition and actions involving climate change.

Wong-Parodi and Feygina found that although liberals were more likely to have a strong emotional response to the narratives, “they showed significantly greater increases in acceptance of climate change and its human causes, perceived proximity, worry, support for climate policy, and intention to adapt to and mitigate climate change as a result of experiencing negative emotion in response to climate narratives” (2020, p. 578). The authors discovered that, “enhancing emotion through climate communication may be a promising tool for counteracting biased assimilation of controversial scientific information, and engaging audiences who might otherwise dismiss or avoid the issue of climate change for group-identity or ideological reasons” (p. 584).

Possible issues with memes

In digital campaigns, memes are effective means of communication whose frames allow humour or irony as an emotional persuasion, but they are not godly. They come with possible pitfalls; as Zhang and Pinto (2021) studied the effects of memes (p.750) on climate change risk perception and civic engagement, they discovered that the use of humour might decrease the perceived risk of climate change, and the author suggests using an education approach to address the risk perception (p. 759). Though despite this finding, the research proved that memes do in fact promote civic engagement. The positive effect of memes on civic engagement is due to the fact that social media “provides convenience so individuals can donate online and promote their beliefs easier which makes the effects of viewing memes more significant” (Zhang & Pinto, 2021, p. 759).

An important note to consider is the importance of humour over fear appeals “that may backfire” (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, as cited in Zhang & Pinto, 2021, p. 753). The use of animals in memes evoked empathy in the study, showing increased civic engagement. As Zhang and Pinto suggested, “future climate change campaigns should consider using more animals in future memes to motivate more people to participate in climate change activities” (2021, p. 759).

Case Study

Many organizations globally work to promote climate change acceptance and action. The UN is a leader in this field. In 2020, it was an entrant in the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising’s Effectiveness Awards for their The People’s Seat campaign (IPA, 2020). Much like the City of Calgary, whose ultimate goals are acceptance of a climate change emergency and corresponding action, this campaign provides insight into salient strategies and tactics in social media campaigns. Both situations involve climate risk communication, and they have unique

communication timelines where risk communication is ongoing and changing as new information and policy evolve. Both situations also immediately required audience action to mitigate risk.

In the UN's campaign, people around the world were allowed to share their views on climate change issues online, and their responses were crafted into a speech where a "People's Representative" (p. 6) presents the collective views to the UN assembly (p. 6). The United Nations would take this view into account and create policy in consideration. It describes that the key to creating engagement is to show the immediate impact of the people's participation (p. 5). It continued the audience participation with its ActNow.bot, which gives insights on climate change initiatives, which to date, according to IPA (2020), "shows 100,000 actions" taken by participants (p. 12). In terms of stakeholder trust, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising discovered some of the highest levels ever reported in the United States (p. 13), and it also was viewed as more effective in climate action overall (see Appendix A).

The importance of creating immediate impact for audience action gives insight into the City of Calgary's climate change emergency risk communications and how it will try to engage citizens in policy and climate action. The City of Calgary's Council could also extrapolate the focus on civic engagement rather than their primary focus on business investors and the oil and gas industry (Smith, 2021); all their policy that follows the declaration will benefit Calgarian support.

Critical Analysis: How the City of Calgary can use social media's saliency in risk communication, and civic action promotion

The review of literature provides insight into the saliency of memes in climate change communication, specifically as a tool to frame messages and increase civic engagement. As the

city intends to use the declaration of a climate emergency to generate more climate policy and action, the use of social platforms and memes can work for the various key messages it will need to communicate around different policies and issues. The use of positive images, like cute animals, also increases the translation of key messages into audience action (Zhang & Pinto, 2021). As Calgarians are pertinent players in addressing climate change, memes act as a salient method of increasing civic action. The platforms allow for the risks to be communicated in a more casual and less scientific tone, allowing for more accurate public assessment.

For climate risk acceptance, it should be understood that memes are not the best form for messages. Instead, as noted by Zhang and Pinto (2021), other forms of persuasion are more salient. The use of emotional narratives is persuasive for both liberal and conservative-leaning audiences, who are separated by algorithms in social media networks. The City of Calgary is home to both types of audiences and needs to target both left and right-leaning audiences. While the city considers emotional appeals, they should also consider the importance of avoiding fear-based persuasion, as they are less effective (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, as cited in Zhang & Pinto, 2021, p. 753).

The case study of The People's Seat suggests that other organizations that use social media campaigns could also promote civic action around climate initiatives. For the City of Calgary, this means it can leverage its owned media. The City of Calgary has many owned social channels with large followings, with the largest reach consisting of 271,900 followers (City of Calgary, n.d.). Similar to the campaign, the City of Calgary, including Mayor Jyoti Gondek, could simultaneously increase public trust.

Next Steps for the City of Calgary Council

It is recommended that the City of Calgary immediately implement a social media campaign to communicate the need for the Climate Emergency Declaration and to generate civic action. The city should use an appropriate combination of memes and emotional narrative posts. The city can consider ways to create instantaneous impacts when prompting the audience to act on climate change, i.e., links to donate, volunteer sign-up sheets, and other social media tools. In the future, as the city creates new climate policies, it can consider the involvement of all civilians in the decision. It can reference The People's Seat's campaign implementation timeline into their own policy campaign formulations (see Appendix B).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the City of Calgary can leverage social media as a tactic to communicate risks and generate action around climate change. The city may also consider developing a social media campaign while considering the strategies of The People's Seat campaign (IPA, 2020). Other considerations examined were the use of memes to increase civic action, emotional narratives to change liberal and conservative acceptance, and to avoid fear-based persuasion (Zhang and Pinto, 2021; Wong-Parodi and Feygina, 2021). The Climate Emergency Declaration requires a comprehensive, ongoing risk communication plan to create the action needed to mitigate climate change risk.

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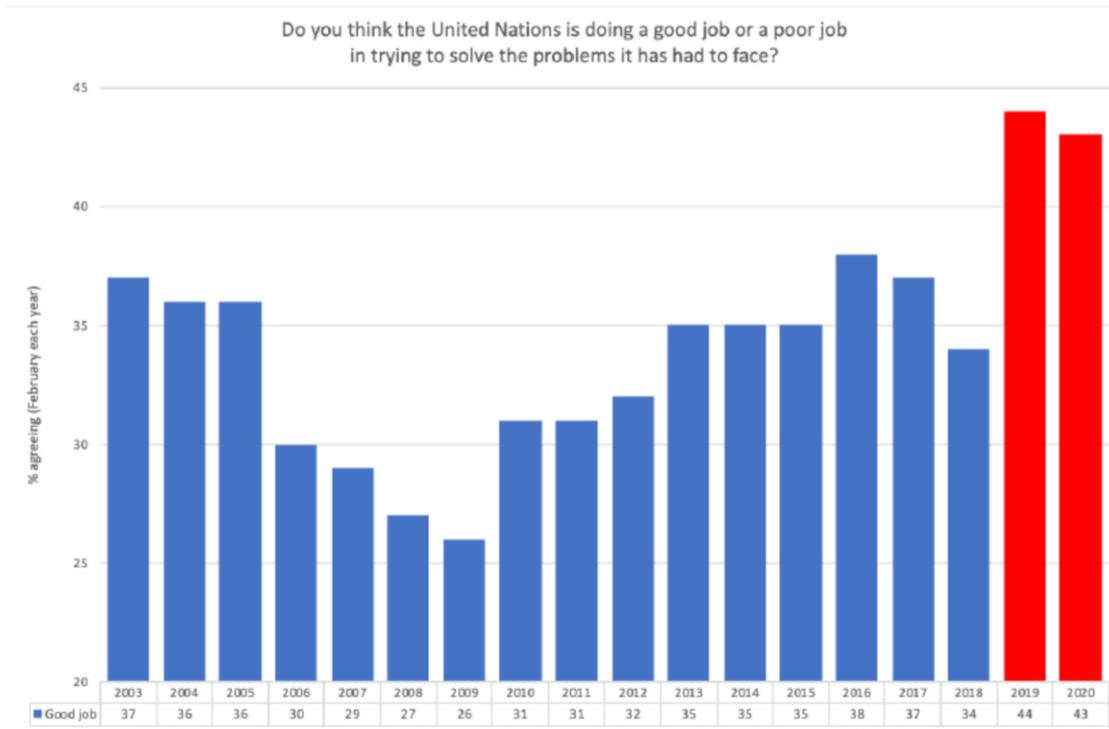
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Appendix A

Figure 1: People agreeing that the UN was 'doing a good job' (IPA, 2020)



Appendix B

Figure 2: The Launch (IPA, 2020)

