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Message framing in the time of the precautionary principle: response to Martell and Rodewald 2019

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Running head: Message Framing

Article Impact Statement: To limit changes in issue framing to instances based on empirical evidence will enshrine the status quo and stymie effective communication.

Martell and Rodewald (2019) considered the recent changes made by *The Guardian* to its style guide. These changes include the reframing of *climate change* as *climate emergency*, *crisis*, or *breakdown*, and *global warming* as *global heating* (Carrington 2019). *The Guardian*'s goal in making these changes is to "more accurately describe the environmental crises facing the world" and to "ensure that we are being scientifically precise" (Carrington 2019).

Martell and Rodewald suggest that “by failing to ground their recommendations in empirical research... *The Guardian* may have missed an opportunity to effectively communicate with and engage readers”. They further argue that the “failure to draw on existing – or call for additional – empirical research is a missed opportunity to spur improvements in communication of complex issues in a precise and effective manner.”

I take rather a different view and applaud *The Guardian* for their awareness, social consciousness, and leadership with respect to their role as a media outlet with major influence. I take issue with the conclusion that *The Guardian* has failed to draw on existing empirical research in adopting its revised language.

Like many scientists, I am a proponent of evidence-based policy; however, I am also mindful that empirical research is not the only method by which to acquire knowledge. Evidence-based policy does not therefore need to be based only on empirically derived research and is likely to be better informed when it draws on multiple strands of evidence. Framing effects are context dependent, making universal rules of framing difficult to pin down. And although there are numerous empirical framing studies that relate to climate change, none entirely address *The Guardian's* needs in this context. As such, any relevant evidence base for this context is imperfect at best.

An insistence then that proactive changes, in this setting or any other, be limited to the extent with which they accord to an established empirically derived evidence base would enshrine the status quo under the guise of being evidence based. It is the avoidance of this kind of problem for which the precautionary principle (i.e., where there is threat of serious damage, a lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason to postpone effective measures of prevention) was developed and made a canon of conservation (UN 1992) .

Yet, the actions of *The Guardian* are supported by empirical research, at least in that they recognize the influence of media framing and the effects subtle differences in language can have in how people perceive and respond to issues (e.g., Harris 1973; Kahneman & Tversky 1984; Entman 1993; Lakoff 2010) and illustrate an understanding that although passive language can often obscure causation, active language can enhance the sense of agency to take action. (See Kusmanoff et al. [2020] for a discussion of strategic framing.) In adopting the new terms, *The Guardian* also draws on the advice and commentary of experts and communicated the reasons for these changes.

The core objection of Martell and Rodewald seems to stem not from a lack of evidence (empirical or otherwise), but from a mismatch between the goals *The Guardian* has set forth and the goals Martell and Rodewald prefer. *The Guardian* seeks to be “scientifically precise,” and to “more accurately describe the environmental crises facing the world” (Carrington 2019). The greater accuracy sought by *The Guardian* is to better reflect the scale of the climate crisis and the urgent need for action. Thus, their re-framed terms are intended to increase the salience of this among their readers. In contrast, Martell and Rodewald are concerned about the risk of increased polarization and conflict around global heating (or *climate change*, if you prefer) and thus argue that *The Guardian* should instead draw on the empirical research that can inform this goal (e.g., Myers et al. 2012).

In my view, both goals have merit, and I heartily applaud Martell and Rodewald for publicly voicing their views and engaging constructively in this discourse. This is something that should be encouraged in the research community.

My own view is that because framing cannot be avoided, because all language necessarily exists in some kind of frame, any contrived neutral frame will always be subjective at best. For my mind it is preferable that, being aware of this, *The Guardian* has deliberately and

transparently chosen a framing that seeks to heighten awareness and promote the urgent need to take action. As researchers, many of us would also do well to be more mindful and transparent of our own values that inevitably translate to our own work, consciously or otherwise, and shed the naïve fiction of the objective scientist (Garrard et al. 2016).

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