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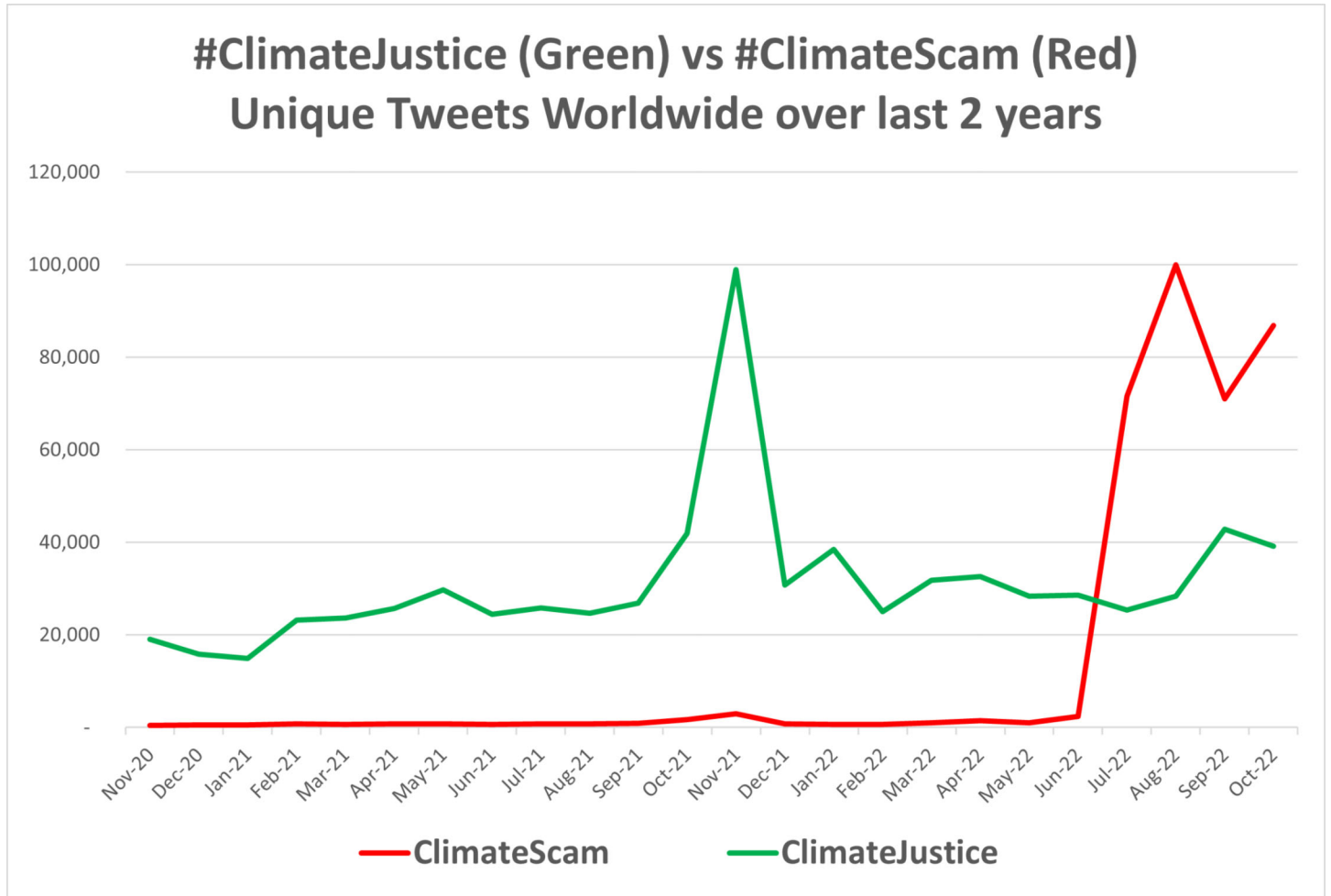
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Professor Jem Bendell

Strategist & educator on social change, focused on Deep Adaptation to societal breakdown



When #ClimateScam is Trending –rethinking climate comms

Posted on November 9, 2022November 9, 2022

Text of speech delivered at COP27, Nov 9th 2022, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, by Prof Jem Bendell. Check against delivery.

“We have a communications problem. Just as political support for climate action is growing, so political resistance to climate action is also growing. The use of the hashtag #ClimateScam has exploded since July of this year. From never exceeding more than 3,000 tweets in any month up to June 2022, it has been used 70,000-100,000 times per month in the four months since. Compare that to the hashtag #ClimateJustice, which has averaged about 30,000 tweets per month for the last two years and almost hit 100,000 unique tweets in the month of COP26 in Glasgow, with all the world’s media attention. But now? #ClimateScam is being used two and a half times for every #ClimateJustice tweet throughout the last 4 months. These twitter trends are one indicator of a growing resistance to climate action.

Here, at a climate event, we might ask: how can people dismiss something happening before their very eyes? Today I'm offering an answer to that question as a professor and political advisor specialising in strategic communications. I assess that resistance to climate action is growing partly because of the bad way climate issues have been communicated to the public by experts and politicians. Badly technical, badly elitist and now badly authoritarian. I believe that reflects a self-serving response from the establishment that is partly to blame for the current backlash, represented by this data on social media, that I share for the first time today.

I want to be very clear how I see things. In only 200 years, industrial activity has increased world temperatures by an amount equivalent to 20% of the total range experienced since the first homo-sapiens walked on Earth over 200,000 years ago. That is an influx of energy that is messing with weather systems, damaging both wilderness and agriculture, let alone settlements and infrastructure. The speed is unprecedented. In my 50 years on this Earth, our planet has been warming 170 times faster than it was cooling over the previous 7,000 years. Ecosystems cannot evolve fast enough to cope with that pace of change.

Unfortunately, communications about this have been badly technical, using incomparable averages. If the public are told that the world has already warmed by 1.2C degrees, how bad do we expect them to feel? Intuitively, people might think of daily maximum temperatures, where an extra 1.2C degrees is not a big deal. Feelings might shift a little once realising that is an average for night and day, summer and winter, and over land and sea. But still there is nothing to compare it with. Such as by knowing it was an average of 13.6C degrees back in the year 1850, before rising to the current 15C degrees. That's a big shift over a tiny period in world history. But if we are stuck discussing incomparable averages, we will lose to those who dismiss us as wanting to hurt their standard of living for a mere 1.5 degrees. Because in mass communications, once you need to explain, you have already lost.

The rush to cash in on the climate crisis that we see in the halls of this conference is not only generating a backlash, but it also marginalises more radical critiques. They demand we stay positive that we will be saved by technology and big business. This is 'climate brightsiding' the public on reality. Because there is some inevitable warming ahead, due to how much additional heat is within the oceans and how much carbon is in the atmosphere. In response, some say that technologies like mechanical Direct Air Capture of CO₂ can help. However, their low effectiveness and high energy demands should not give us confidence. Meanwhile research debunks the argument that economic growth can be sufficiently decoupled from resources so that the world economy can keep growing without terrible consequences. Both psychological research and activist testimony shows us that anticipating difficult futures is not demotivating. Instead, believing that technology and big business will sort it out for us is demotivating.

But as impacts worsen, atmospheric carbon increases, and the science becomes more troubling, we see a new mistake in how leaders think and talk about climate. Oftentimes, when leaders realise that the systems they administer are threatened, they respond with draconian decisions that make matters worse. For instance, brutal approaches to law and order in the wake of disasters. With climate, such 'elite panic' could inspire leaders to curtail personal freedoms. Resistant populations might then regard action on climate as synonymous with coercive power, rather than collaboration. We already hear authoritarian sentiments on climate issues. Instead, the future of communications on this crisis must focus on freeing all of us from the systems that drive us to dump costs onto others and nature. Let's work with the fact that most people want to do the right thing if they aren't forced by circumstance to do otherwise.

The communications mistakes I've described result from the kinds of people dominating the climate agenda. It's why a bottom-up movement on climate justice is central to everything going forward."

Research note:

Links to research papers backing up all the statements in this speech are available in [related article by Professor Jem Bendell in the Resilience e-zine.](https://www.resilience.org/stories/2022-10-26/bad-communication-on-climate-has-bad-consequences-we-must-do-better/) (<https://www.resilience.org/stories/2022-10-26/bad-communication-on-climate-has-bad-consequences-we-must-do-better/>).

The data on twitter hashtags was compiled by TrackMyHashtag.com. There is no evidence that these tweets came from bots. The hashtags were chosen as they clearly relate to a perspective on climate change, which would not be clear from a hashtag like #ClimateChange. This was rudimentary research, but triangulates with stories in Western media in UK and Canada, about #ClimateScam trending on twitter in the past summer. Further online sentiment analysis is necessary to assess the extent, location, demographics and trends of this new form of climate scepticism, which focuses on either the financial greed involved in climate responses or the authoritarian inclinations of politicians and bureaucrats. Reacting to this sentiment by advocating for more censorship of social media, as some thinktanks have done in relation to the rumours of a future of ‘climate lockdowns’, would be illogical and harmful. Instead, the substantive concerns that people have about the direction of policies and power need to be addressed as well as better communications achieved.

Comments made at COP27 sessions on previous days by Bendell:

On [climate honesty](http://iflas.blogspot.com/2022/11/cumbria-university-professor-hosts.html) (<http://iflas.blogspot.com/2022/11/cumbria-university-professor-hosts.html>), not climate brightsiding, Monday 7th 2022

On the reasons for 30 years of failure and [implications for climate justice movement](https://jembendell.com/2022/11/08/the-lamborghini-loving-culture-kills-life-on-earth-but-the-conference-of-profits-cop-is-fine-with-that/) (<https://jembendell.com/2022/11/08/the-lamborghini-loving-culture-kills-life-on-earth-but-the-conference-of-profits-cop-is-fine-with-that/>), Tuesday 8th, 2022

Tagged [climate change](#), [extinction rebellion](#)

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