

# Environmental Sustainability & The Social Script

**Brenda McNally, O'Hare Scholar,**  
School of Communications, Dublin City University

[brenda.mcnally5@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:brenda.mcnally5@mail.dcu.ie)

- ‘In hard times, it can be difficult to attend to the long-term. When recession and debt pose urgent constraints, 10 year targets and 50 year plans may seem a luxury. Climate Change can appear far away in both time and space and yet of course it is not far away – it is not merely a long-term problem. **Climate change is what we are doing right here and now**’

**Mary Robinson, ‘Reshaping the Debate on Climate Change’, 2010**

*The EPA and Climate Change: Responsibilities, Challenges and Opportunities 2011 Report*



- Driver: Transition to Low Carbon Society – EU2020 key policy target  
**Increasing Climate Change and Sustainability Agenda**
- With growing awareness of this topic, larger numbers now compete to characterise and frame climate change and decarbonisation  
‘Those who control the discourse on risk will most likely control the political battles as well’ (Plough & Krinsky, 1987)
- **BUT, what are the implications of increasing calls for public involvement on**
  - meaning-making about citizen engagement
  - actual roles advanced for citizens in the transition to a low carbon future?
- Critics question whether:  
‘serve incumbent interests rather than contributing to socially sustainable and democratic decision-making’ (Hoppner, 2009)

- **‘The use and influence of mass media(ted) communication on (potential) social participation in the transition to a low carbon society’**
- Dominant model for public engagement wrt climate change is ‘Behaviour Change’
  - Value-Action Gap
  - Calls for new thinking – research focus now on ‘social/citizen participation’
- **How does the growing climate change/sustainability agenda impact on public involvement in transition to low carbon society?**
- Analysis concentrates on **under-researched aspects of social participation** from mass communication and media studies and environmental risk communication perspective

- Three-part analysis of Media, Policy and key Social Actors communicating about climate change and decarbonisation (processes of reducing GHGs)
- Focus
  - Print (legacy) media (re)construction
  - On-line communication strategies
- Results highlight implications for (potential) citizen participation at
  - National level and Local level
  - Symbolic Environment
  - Substantive Impacts
- Inform Policy-maker and Communication Practice
- **Doyle (2012)**: We have established the technoscientific template for transition but the socio-technical template has yet to be addressed

- Qualitative Analysis – critical lense
- triangulate primary qualitative research & secondary quantitative analysis

<b>Media Analysis</b> Inductive approach	Discourse Analysis Frame/Claims-maker Analysis
<b>On-line Communication Strategies</b> State & Non-State Actors	Discourse & Content Analysis - Policy Formation - Public Comm Campaigns Analysis of Communication Model
<b>Secondary Data</b> Irish longitudinal studies of public attitudes, perception towards the environment	-Public Perception of Climate Change (PhD forthcoming, NUIG) -Environmental Attitudes & Behaviour (Eurobarometer, 2009 & 2011) -Environmental Discourses (Kelly, 2003)

- Calls for more qualitative research around Climate Change and associated issues – Whitmarsh, Lorenzoni et al (2011)
- Calls for environmental comms research to reconnect with ‘sociological concerns about inequalities of power, access and communicative resources in the public sphere’ Hansen, (2011)
- Add Irish data to a growing international field of research
- Inform policy-makers and comms practitioners in relation to formation of Societal Pathways for environmental sustainability and low carbon future
- Add to knowledge about social (re)contextualisation of science  
Not just about scientists or environmental/NGO comm – this topic is a paradigmatic case study of sustainability comms and of science and society relationship