

W. Lance Bennett, **Communicating the Future: Solutions for Environment, Economy, and Democracy**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021, 200 pp., \$59.95 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paperback), \$16.00 (kindle).

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With **Communicating the Future: Solutions for Environment, Economy, and Democracy**, W. Lance Bennett has written a compact, accessible, and useful book that compliments—in both substance and tone—influential works such as Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything*, Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature*, and Naomi Oreskes’s *Merchants of Doubt*. These books situate the climate crisis in broader scientific, cultural, and political contexts. The author cites them at length, and undertakes advancing the project of combating climate change by articulating a communication strategy equal to the daunting task. Where Klein, McKibben, and Oreskes offered a vision of where we need to go, Bennett offers a roadmap.



Professors who would like to use these related texts (or who already do) in advanced undergraduate or graduate courses on environmental or science communication will find that *Communicating the Future* connects arguments about the cultural, political, and scientific sources of the climate crisis to communications theory and practice.

W. Lance Bennett is the Ruddick C. Lawrence professor of communication and professor of political science at the University of Washington. He has spent more than four decades working across disciplines on the most pressing and difficult political communication challenges of our time, and he brings all that experience to bear in this volume.

The author’s influential 1983 book *News: The Politics of Illusion* is in its 10th edition, which makes it notable that he does not consider politicians or journalists the primary target audience for *Communicating the Future*. If someone with Bennett’s background and insight has given up on the leadership potential of politicians and the press, we should all be concerned (more on this later). The book is aimed at scholars, students, activists, and leaders of citizen organizations, who Bennett sees as key to generating the radical change needed to avert climate crisis.

The book begins with a vignette about Greta Thunberg, perhaps the perfect example of the type of emerging social leader who Bennett believes has the potential to transform the dynamics of environmental communication. The ensuing five compact chapters introduce Bennett’s *idea-flow model* of communication. Chapter 3 validates the model in historical context by detailing how it operated in the development and rise to prominence of neoliberal economics. This example conveys how and why the model works by showing it in action; it is also a detailed and illuminating microhistory of the neoliberal movement.

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The core of the problem, according to Bennett, is our current approach to communicating about complex problems. By chopping up the problem into coherent independent elements (that can be tackled by a specific policy, for example) the focus is turned to symptoms instead of causes, and the big picture is lost. Rather, communication needs to capture the intersecting causes that underlie complex problems by coordinating the “production, packaging, and networking of game-changing ideas” (p. 5).

Bennett points out that our institutions are “built on assumptions that socioeconomic systems were working fairly well, and that policy processes should address relatively narrow categories of things” (p. 7). In this communication logic, any political proposal must “be realistic.” Climate change, however, mandates that we reimagine the entire system, not just tweak it here and there. In this context, cautious compromises like “green growth” and “sustainable development” are just fig leaves for abandoning transformative economics we need.

Bennett argues that the idea-flow model can “(a) develop communication processes that (b) better enable diverse groups in different societies (c) to build stronger networks with common agendas, (d) that gain support in elections and policy processes, and (e) receive uptake from political parties and governments” (p. 6).

As this description illustrates, the model requires work at the global level over the long term; groups of social actors must coalesce around a messaging strategy and coordinate their efforts over years if not decades. This argument clearly eschews the “magic bullet” hopefulness that some label or piece of spin will turn the tide in public opinion. Paradigm shifts are usually born of crisis, but also hard work. Bennett also goes beyond the simplistic “personal responsibility” approaches that foresee environmental salvation in millions of beneficial individual behaviors. Bennett puts the lie to this idea with the clear understanding that solutions big enough to meet the challenge are only possible through transformative, collective social action.

The bridge to the necessary new political and economic paradigm is “communicating positive visions of change that motivate political realignment behind a new economics,” which is possible, Bennett argues, “with a more unified politics and the communication strategies to spread ideas and promote policies,” and “changing how we think, communicate, organize and act” (p. 4). Despite resistance from business interests, timid or corrupt politicians, noise from popular movements and leaders of the radical right, Bennett is optimistic about success if we can “understand how transformative ideas acquire the clarity and commitment to fuel movements that resonate with publics and politicians” (p. 5).

Given how polluted and politicized climate change communication has become, such coordinated social transformation may seem impossible. But Bennett makes a compelling case that it is possible by illustrating how the idea-flow model operated in the emergence of the core problem in the climate crisis—the rise to dominance of neoliberal economics.

Neoliberal economics is widely accepted as “just the way things work” by leaders across key social sectors—politics, media, business—and the public at large. But there was nothing historically inevitable about this paradigm. The intellectual groundwork was laid by a core of philosophers, economists, and other thought leaders through a coordinated global network of think tanks, sympathetic media, and other institutions—over decades.

Bennett identifies Friedrich Hayek as a central intellectual figure in this effort. He recounts how Hayek, an Austrian-British philosopher born in 1899, was instrumental in promoting the libertarian goals of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) in the post-WWII era. So began a coordinated effort to package small-government, anti-union, tax-cutting policies in acceptable language, along with the explicit and implicit assumption that neoliberal capitalism is the inevitable natural human condition.

Like many paradigm shifts, the neoliberal worldview gained acceptance in a time of crisis. In the 1970s and 1980s, Western economies were facing stagflation, and along with it a sense that traditional Keynesian policies were not up to the task. Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the UK turned to neoliberal economic solutions, and the new economics has remained “the way the world works” since. Bennett conveys the famous quote from economist Milton Friedman (another MPS member and a Nobel laureate) that in times of real or perceived crisis “the actions taken depend on the ideas that are lying around” (p. 116). Neoliberal economics was “lying around,” not by historical accident but because of the production, packaging, and networking done by the organized forces promoting it. All that was necessary to make those ideas economic reality was political uptake.

Production, packaging, networking, and political uptake (with an opportunity provided by crisis) are of course the essential steps in the idea-flow model, and Bennett’s big idea is that when the next opportunity arises, the essential elements of a new, sustainable economics are “lying around.” Bennett laments that fractured priorities on the left have led to two lost opportunities this century—the Great Recession and the global pandemic. Yet he remains optimistic that center-leaning and progressive forces around the world can coalesce around a new and sustainable economics to lead us into the future.

That the climate crisis might be averted following the same communication strategy that gave us its core problem is ironic, and not without challenges. Bennett agrees with Hayek that politicians and journalists are “secondhand” conveyors of ideas; the real intellectual foundation of the new paradigm must come from academics, think tanks, activists, and other thought leaders. While historical evidence supports this argument, there is a good deal of cross-over. Is Al Gore a politician? Is Naomi Klein a journalist? The answer to both is certainly yes, but they are also thought leaders central and essential to the project. Both are controversial. Sorting out who speaks for the climate movement and what they say will be a difficult process. Bennett’s starting with Greta Thunberg suggests the solution may be generational.

There is serious work to do in the “packaging” phase of the idea-flow model as well. Hayek famously promoted neoliberalism through “dual reality,” knowing many core elements would be unacceptable—“growing employment” sounds a lot better than “amassing wealth at the top.” Will the climate movement agree on any such duplicitous strategy? Bennett argues there are inspiring and inclusive ways to communicate sustainable economics that will be acceptable to the necessary coalition of communicators. The devil is in the details; progressives do not fall in line the way conservatives do.

These challenges aside, Bennett’s idea-flow model provides a communication strategy equal to the monumental challenge of climate change—a roadmap to the only destination that averts crisis. What we need now is a GPS route with all the details filled in, and for a broad global coalition of progressive and center-leaning forces to follow it. As unlikely as this seems, perhaps it is inevitable. The alternative is unthinkable.