CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS FIELD ASSESSMENT

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OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

As scientists confirm that we have little more than a decade to bring aggressive climate solutions to global economies, funders and practitioners alike must get clear and aligned on the opportunities for collaboration, field-building, and greater impact within the climate communications space.

OUR FOCUS

This assessment focuses **on national field supporting, communications organizations conducting broad issue-based communications activities and capacities**, as opposed to brand-focused, institution-focused, specific issue-campaigns, or localized groups and activities, in the United States. These broad issue-based capacities are the focus of this assessment because they:
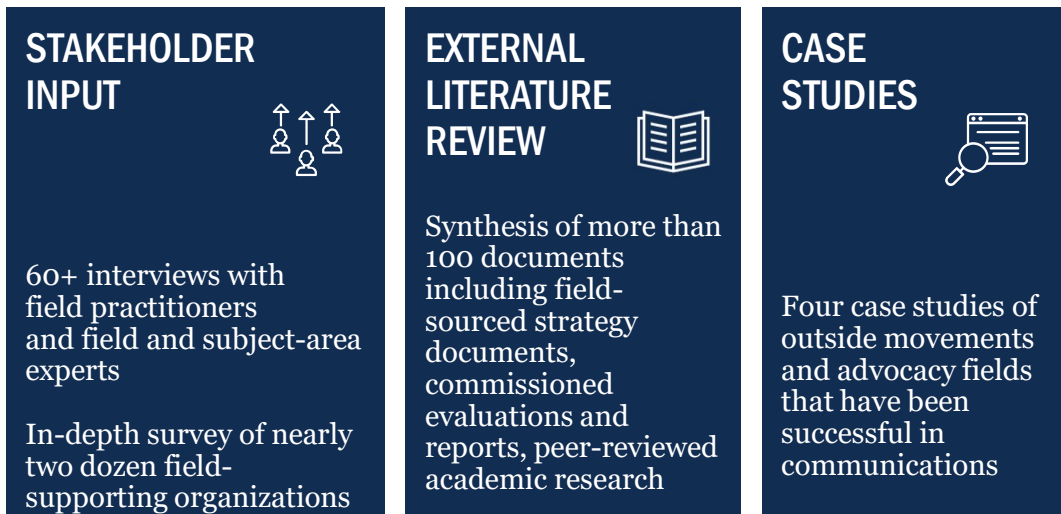
a) provide issue and audience research to the field and a variety of specific efforts across the field, both national and local in nature,

b) offer strategic support to brand-focused, institution-focused, specific-issue campaigns, and localized communications activities,

c) increase the public profile of the climate change issue and general public awareness on climate change and its solutions,

d) help networks and coalitions align around broader communications goals, strategies, and tactics.

OUR PURPOSE

1	Provide a view of the climate field's shared issue-based communications resources and capacities
2	Understand where gaps exist at this broad level of issue-based communications work
3	Identify opportunities for the field to grow and strengthen its field-supporting resources and capacities over the long-term

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PROCESS FOR HOW THE FIELD ASSESSMENT WAS DEVELOPED

INPUTS

STAKEHOLDER INPUT

60+ interviews with field practitioners and field and subject-area experts

In-depth survey of nearly two dozen field-supporting organizations

EXTERNAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Synthesis of more than 100 documents including field-sourced strategy documents, commissioned evaluations and reports, peer-reviewed academic research

CASE STUDIES

Four case studies of outside movements and advocacy fields that have been successful in communications
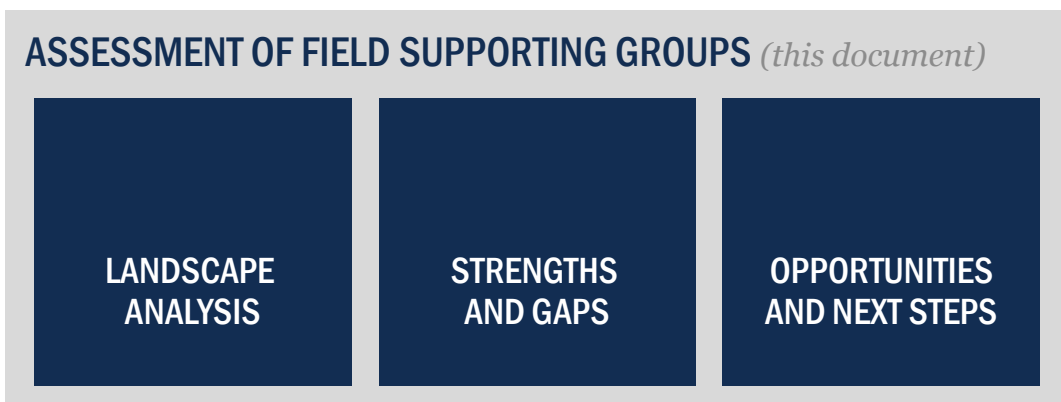
INTERVIEWS INCLUDED

People's Climate Movement, RE-AMP Network, Southeast Climate & Energy Network, 100% Renewable Energy Network, PowerShift Network, US Climate Action Network (USCAN), Solutions Project, Center for Western Priorities, NRDC, Media Matters, Climate Advocacy Lab, Yale Center for Climate Communications, George Mason University Center for Climate Communications, Center for American Progress, Energy Foundation, Resource Media, Purpose Climate Lab, Spake Media, the Energy and Policy Institute, academic experts, foundation leaders, technology leaders at social media platforms, and more.

OUTPUTS

ASSESSMENT OF FIELD SUPPORTING GROUPS *(this document)*

| LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS | STRENGTHS AND GAPS | OPPORTUNITIES AND NEXT STEPS |

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LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS SUMMARY

SUBJECTS

National field-supporting communications organizations such as the Climate Action Campaign, Climate Advocacy Lab, Energy Media, Climate Nexus, Purpose Climate Lab, and more than a dozen other field-supporting national communications-focused capacities and groups were the focus of the assessment.

GOALS

Across national field-supporting capacities and organizations, **policy change** is the primary long-term goal, supported by building public support and engaging specific audiences.

AUDIENCES

Groups primarily focus communications toward **policy makers and progressives,** with very limited focus on a handful of specific constituencies including conservatives, business leaders, Latinos, communities of color, youth, public health communities, and military communities.

RESOURCES

Climate communications faces a **massive funding asymmetry** relative to the anti-climate action opposition and fossil fuels industry, who contribute at least 10x the resources.

A majority of field-supporting resources are going towards **long-term narrative building** and **near-term defense**, particularly at the national level.

ACTIVITIES

Activities mainly focus on **research, campaign strategy, and content development & distribution,** much more than collective strategy.

Most communications actors do not specialize in a narrow set of capabilities but operate across multiple communications functions and activities.

FRAMES

Environment, corruption and/or special interest-driven politics, health, and economics are the predominant issue frames employed, with less focus on morality or generational impacts.

CHANNELS

Earned media, particularly print, remains the primary distribution channel, with increasing efforts to use social media and key opinion leaders.

There are **no major owned media channels** for distribution.

NETWORK

The field-supporting organizations are a close-knit community, built on **strong personal connections** at the leadership level.

STRENGTHS AND GAPS

STRENGTHS	GAPS
Nimble and coordinated pivots in response to federal and state policy landscape changes	**Lack of field-level alignment and coordination** between groups on a **high-level and long-term approach** and a corresponding **lack of coordinated funding**
Well-coordinated core of field-supporting groups	Insufficient connections between national and **local/frontline organizations**, as well as other **allied fields and causes**
Robust integration of climate **evidence and policy into message development**	Aggregate work emphasizes message over messenger; opportunity to utilize **key opinion leaders or influencers**
Strong report writing credentials and **demonstrated success in earning print media**	**Limited specialized digital and social media capacities** due to resource constraints and staffing emphasis on earned media
Recent victories for climate progress and clean energy defense efforts	Insufficient tools or resources for **measuring long-term communications impact**, with limited ability to **adapt longer-term strategies** based on results
Highly-skilled practitioners with demonstrated success tailoring messages to different audiences	Many, sometimes competing, tailored and individual narratives; lacking alignment around a few **strong umbrella narratives, particularly positive narratives on climate change**
Strong messaging and narrative basis on and integration of **facts, evidence, and research** ("head" strong)	Lack of **creative and graphic capacities**, including the **market-testing of creative material**, with an emphasis on facts and written content

KEY DETAILS AND TAKEAWAYS ON GAPS

NOTABLE INTERVIEW QUOTES

" WE NEED TO HAVE A STRATEGY TO BUILD POWER. WHAT'S OUR 5-YEAR, 20-YEAR PLAN TO BUILD POWER TO WIN ON CLIMATE CHANGE? "

" THERE IS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE NATIONAL GROUPS AND THOSE ON THE FRONTLINES, WITH NO REAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO SHARE RESOURCES, ALIGN EFFORTS, ETC. "

" MOST GRASSROOTS AND LOCAL GROUPS DON'T HAVE ENOUGH FUNDING TO DO STRATEGIC COMMS; THIS IS THE FIRST NEED BECAUSE THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION IS REALLY HAPPENING AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL."

" THERE IS ALIGNMENT ON OUTCOMES; MEASUREMENT IS THE CHALLENGE. "

" RELATIVE TO OTHER FIELDS, CLIMATE HAS A CROWDED FIELD OF NARRATIVES, WHICH MAY BE COMPETING WITH ONE ANOTHER. "

MORE DETAILS ON GAP AREAS

COLLECTIVE LONG-TERM STRATEGY

- Less than 15% of resources of surveyed groups are devoted toward coordinating long-term, field-level strategy among partners.

- There is limited knowledge of or alignment on field-wide goals and markers across organizations.

- Nearly all of the surveyed organizations depend on annual funding, which precludes long-term planning.

- Few organizations have the bandwidth or support to share failures with the field in transformative and useful ways.

BROADER COORDINATION

- While multiple venues exist for groups to coordinate campaign-specific communications activities, very few are available for groups to coordinate broad, field-level communications strategy.

- Much coordination among field supporting groups happens on an ad hoc or case-by-case basis and not through organized mechanisms, which could foster efficiency and better alignment.

- Many groups have or are building partnerships with local, grassroots, and frontlines groups, as well as other causes, however very few coordination resources and mechanisms are available.

MEASUREMENT, LEARNING, AND ADAPTATION

- Limited, short-term funding fosters competition and limits open sharing of outcomes. A majority of organizations have called for a culture change among funders that values experimentation and failure.

- The field largely lacks common metrics and measurement tools.

- While nearly all communications groups track outputs, one-third explicitly track public action or behavior change, and one-third of organizations are tracking changes in public attitudes following their efforts/interventions.

EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES

- Actors have excelled in crafting and delivering hosts of specific messages about policies and moments, but are lacking alignment around broad narratives and stories that can be told above specifics, appealing to wide audiences

- The resulting complex, sometimes dissonant message landscape may result in difficulty in moving audiences

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KEY SUPPORTING
DATA ON GAPS

NOTABLE INTERVIEW QUOTES

" SOCIAL MEDIA IS A MORE THAN A DISTRIBUTION CHANNEL; IT'S A WAY TO GATHER AUDIENCE INSIGHTS, IDENTIFY GROUPS, AND CULTIVATE DIALOGUES. "

"THE CLIMATE FIELD ON THE WHOLE IS DOING A GREAT JOB WITH WRITTEN CONTENT, BUT WE MISS THE CONTENT MOST PEOPLE CONSUME."

"THERE IS A HUGE GAP IN MESSENGER DEVELOPMENT; THE FIELD NEEDS TO THINK ABOUT HOW IT'S BUILDING A NETWORK OF INDIVIDUALS WHO AREN'T TIED TO INSTITUTIONS."

MORE DETAILS ON GAP AREAS

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- Though social media is collectively ranked among the top three most valuable outputs, less than 1/6 of communications staff of surveyed organizations are dedicated to digital and social media

- Most groups describe social media as an additional distribution channel, rather than a platform to better identify, understand, and engage with audiences

- Social media platforms report that climate organizations do not approach them for help using their platforms effectively, despite having dedicated programs to supporting nonprofit advocacy efforts

VISUAL STORYTELLING

- Only 10% of climate communications staff of surveyed organizations are dedicated to creative communications and/or content development for digital and social media

INFLUENCERS

- Half of the groups surveyed work to cultivate trusted messengers and influential spokespeople outside of the field of climate change

- Few organizations are working with older, center, and right-of-center influencers to reach a wider political base

- Less than 20% of groups explicitly stated working with prominent communities of color (e.g., African Americans, Latinos) and/or vulnerable communities in supporting storytellers and influencers who can speak to their concerns and the links to climate change

MEASUREMENT IS FOCUSED ON OUTPUTS AND INTEREST, WITH LIMITED ABILITY TO DIRECTLY MEASURE OUTCOMES

MEASUREMENT APPROACH

MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION	EXAMPLES AND SUPPORTING METRICS	PERCENT OF FIELD-SUPPORTING ORGS USING EACH APPROACH
OUTPUTS	Number of publications, tweets, or other raw production volumes	100%
AUDIENCE INTEREST	Number of views, retweets, likes, and other indicators of actual penetration	88%
ATTITUDINAL CHANGE	Changes in opinion or belief in target audiences, e.g. through target polling	58%
ACTION OR BEHAVIOR CHANGE	Actual impact of efforts on driving intended actions (e.g. signatures, votes)	33%
POLICY CHANGE	Effect of specific comms efforts towards achieving target policy outcomes	Typically the result of many parallel comms, advocacy, and policy efforts and difficult to disentangle

KEY MEASUREMENT THEMES

FUNDERS SOMETIMES HAVE UNFOUNDED EXPECTATIONS FOR COMMS

With funder demands, the metrics aren't always useful or consistent

"WE DON'T HAVE THE BANDWIDTH OR SUPPORT FOR ROBUST MEASUREMENT"

There aren't sufficient resources for measurement and evaluation, and revealing failures isn't looked upon favorably

"WE'RE MISSING THE TO-WHAT-END AND WHY"

Despite the known gap between outputs and outcomes for comms, we're missing refined metrics for measurement of success/effectiveness

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FIVE EMERGING OPPORTUNITY THEMES TO STRENGTHEN THE FIELD

1 Work to **coordinate around long-term goals and pathways to impact**, understanding and allowing for diversity in organizational strategies, tactics, and audiences

2 Focus on and collectively develop a subset of **compelling narratives**

3 Invest in **digital and social media** to better understand and effectively engage key audiences toward change

4 Cultivate and support a diverse range of **individual influencers and storytellers** who can seed institutions of power and serve as trusted messengers

5 Find ways to better **support and learn from frontline and grassroots groups**, and **strengthen connectivity** with these organizations and other allied fields and movements

FOUR CASE EXAMPLES
FROM OTHER MOVEMENTS CAN INFORM CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS

While there is no analog to climate change, several different movements provide compelling lessons for climate communications that can inform the opportunities the field chooses to pursue. Four are highlighted below.

MOVEMENT	SUMMARY	KEY TAKEAWAYS/ INSIGHTS
NEO-LIBERALISM	Long-term, power-building effort that displaced Keynesian paradigm through strategic unification of disparate groups	• Long-term funding of multi-issue organizations and institutions alongside field power-building efforts enabled relatively under-funded efforts – such as the conservative legal movement – to succeed • Lead proponents understood the need to communicate – via influencers – a broader agenda and values-based narrative about equity, morality, and a better future for all rather than engage in disputes about facts and policy details
THE TEA-PARTY & NEO-POPULISM	Recent grassroots-led movement that employed new media and influencers across multiple issues to capture power	• The infrastructure – connected groups, leaders, tools, and networks – was in place that allowed the movement to seize on a series of 'moments' (financial crisis, Obamacare) that led to a groundswell of public support • By going beyond mere microtargeting and thoroughly understanding the existing online communities/discussions, actors could much more effectively recruit and mobilize new constituent groups
TOBACCO CONTROL	Science-based, health-framed effort that achieved policy wins by establishing trusted messengers	• Science alone proved insufficient to motivate public behavior change or even policymaker action, absent the development of critical influencers throughout society. The cultivation of messengers/influencers turned the tide for the tobacco control movement. • Establishing secular morality was an effective means to build broad public and political will, in which figures and agencies who were 'above reproach' helped bypass political battles, personal beliefs, and the tobacco lobby's outsized influence. • Accepting compromise and avoiding efforts to promote an outright tobacco ban, and, eventually, working with tobacco companies themselves to promote anti-smoking campaigns, was one decision that drastically advanced behavior change and public sentiment – despite sacrificing the chance of an outright tobacco ban.
MARRIAGE EQUALITY	Single-issue movement successfully redefined prevailing narrative following multiple defeats, and aligned around that narrative	• Despite having developed a well-crafted, research-driven narrative, the movement went 'back to the drawing board' and to better understand the underlying views and frames of key demographics. • The movement embraced a low-cost "test and learn" digital and social approach that permitted rapid learning, deep understanding of why messages resonated or failed, and iteration of compelling creative content. • Strong coordination enabled a rapid and collective turn away from ineffective narrative, highlighted by joint use of research, content, and approaches to efficiently achieve victories nationwide.

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE FIELD TO ACT ON OPPORTUNITIES:

BUILD COLLECTIVE LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Determine where the greatest alignment exists around common goals, and find ways to unify around a longer-term, collective pathways to impact, accepting there will be different approaches and theories of change. Key questions to address include: a) Where is there the most agreement around final goals and outcomes, and what is needed to achieve them?; b) How can we ensure we accommodate different organizational strategies, audiences/constituencies, and tactics? And c) What corresponding planning and resource models are need to foster collaboration, coordination, and resilience?

EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES

Assess the myriad major narratives the field currently supports and determine which narratives practitioners see and measurement and evidence supports as having the greatest potential. Work together to surface what opportunities exist for broader, overarching narratives and to understand how practitioners can link to and reinforce these overarching narratives in their daily work.

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Reconsider digital: from a one-way audience-targeting tool to two-way audience engagement and learning platform. Direct focus and additional resources towards digital approaches that both deepen audience understanding and facilitate more intimate, targeted, and effective engagement. Establish learning and/or shared services that helps others learn and scale in digital.

INDIVIDUAL INFLUENCERS

Shift in approach from crafting the perfect message to activating the right voices. Identify and recruit messengers that effectively move target constituencies while simultaneously developing future influencers, building a national network of well-informed individuals in positions of power and influence. Direct resources and support organizations devoted to talent development and promotion.

BROADER CONNECTIVITY

Engage more consistently and strategically with frontline actors, specifically local & grassroots orgs, to provide comms support and resources in a way that effectively leverages their influence and reinforces their core narratives. Funders should direct support to build frontline groups' capacity for strategic communications and increase their direct access to resources, specialized staff, services, data, and digital tools. Field-supporting groups should work with frontline and ground groups to understand what support they need and lend it.

EMERGING PATH FORWARD

In January 2019, Hewlett and Camber brought these national field-supporting climate communications groups and many of their philanthropic partners to discuss the findings of this assessment. Out of that convening, the groups aligned on four immediate priorities for action, and organized into four working groups over spring-summer 2019 to share lessons learned and ideas on:

- Expanding digital & social media, and their coordination around it

- Improving their service to grassroots and frontlines groups

- Researching and coordinating around effective narratives

- Increasing coordination and collaboration among funders (climate communications funders only)

COMMON THEMES

While each working group had a specific mandate, several common themes emerged:

- **Field-supporting groups feel the field needs more alignment on common end objectives.** Building broad public support for lasting climate action requires a different strategy than a near-term focus on specific policies or events.

- In order to succeed, communications field-strengthening efforts must be rooted in deep **understanding of the needs and values of a diverse range of key constituencies** across the political spectrum. The **groups on the ground** focusing on these communities and constituencies **need direct funding to build their own communications capacities** as well.

- There are inherent tradeoffs between developing an aligned strategy and narrative "at the top" versus **engaging key constituencies in a more democratic, two-way conversation.** For this reason, **coordination and collaboration should be the goal over alignment.**

- This multi-level coordination – between funders, organizations, and grassroots and localized constituencies across the political spectrum – is highly valued but **requires dedicated resources, cultural competency, trust, and time to achieve.** It is worth the effort and time because it **delivers transformative, durable step-change as opposed to incremental, reversible progress.**

- Funders have an outsize role in either creating competition, gaps, redundancies, and perpetuating weaknesses in the field or creating collaboration, coordination, and building field strengths. Funders will need to **adjust funding strategies, coordination, and metrics to enable the field to shift** to broader public support and political will, more democratic engagement, and increased coordination.

- **How to measure long-term impact of this shift remains an unsolved challenge** for both funders and communications partners, and is worthy of investment and knowledge sharing.

WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINDINGS

DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA	This working group agreed to continue to coordinate efforts to develop content, share resources and insights, better serve frontline groups, and enhance polling and monitoring. Their recommendations include: • Invest in increasing in-house digital, social media, and data capabilities • Develop a shared real-time monitoring capability to capture and share standardized information on communications approaches and outcomes • Provide a shared resource to support coordination of data collection, analysis and insights across organizations
ENHANCING COORDINATION WITH GRASSROOTS & FRONTLINES	The group committed to exploring ways to leverage each organization's strengths to listen to and co-create with frontlines and grassroots organizations to better meet their needs. Their recommendations include: • Fund development of a network of "connector organizations" with trusted relationships across a wide group of frontlines and grassroots organizations • Develop mechanisms to help link the frontlines with content, trainings, and communications capacity to meet their needs
EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES	In addition to continuing existing coordinated efforts to build capacity and share knowledge, content, and learnings about effective narratives, the group explored opportunities to test and evaluate narratives set around 1-2 moments or issues. To strengthen this effort, they recommend: • Develop a narrative strategy "war room" to jointly roll-out a set of long-term narrative strategies and monitor what is working and what is not • Increase capacity across the existing comms organizations to develop, apply, and amplify effective narratives
ALIGNING FUNDERS	The funders are exploring a coordination model to align their comms funding strategies to build broad public support and political will for climate action: • Ground coordination in the understanding of each key geography and share and coordinate around global moments and multilateral efforts • Invest in understanding the values and needs of key constituencies across political spectrum and how to engage them • Strengthen comms field capacities to pivot to broader, more dynamic and democratic engagement: digital & social media, community mobilization, misinformation management, and narrative development

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CONCLUSION, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, AND LEARN MORE

The final phase of this assessment concluded in late fall/early winter 2019 with the conclusions and recommendations of the funder and field-supporting working groups, but the learning continues. We at the Hewlett Foundation remain committed to learning, and to sharing what we have learned with the broader community.

We are grateful to all of the groups and individuals who shared ideas, input, and feedback throughout all phases of work in this assessment. We are humbled at the spirit with which our partners and colleagues have engaged in this assessment: eager to face and share challenges and gaps as a part of a larger effort to grow and improve the field, in service of advancing public understanding and support of climate change.

Special thanks go to the fantastic team at Camber Collective who worked on this assessment, helped facilitate the working groups, and shared and engaged with dozens of additional stakeholders in the rollout of the assessment and working group findings: Nick Bennette, Bethanie Thomas, Michaela Crunkleton Wilson, Tina Liang, Rebekah Kreckman, Hope Neighbor, and Brian Leslie.

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