

Communication of difficult topics: how to reach audience?

Gabrielė Burbulytė-Tsiskarishvili
Klaipėda university, Lithuania

PLAN

- 1. Why environmental communication often fails**
- 2. Fear, fatigue and constructive urgency**
- 3. Jargon, clarity and public meaning**
- 4. Audiences, relevance and framing**
- 5. Trust, stereotypes and the messenger effect**
- 6. Visual identity, media logic and social media**

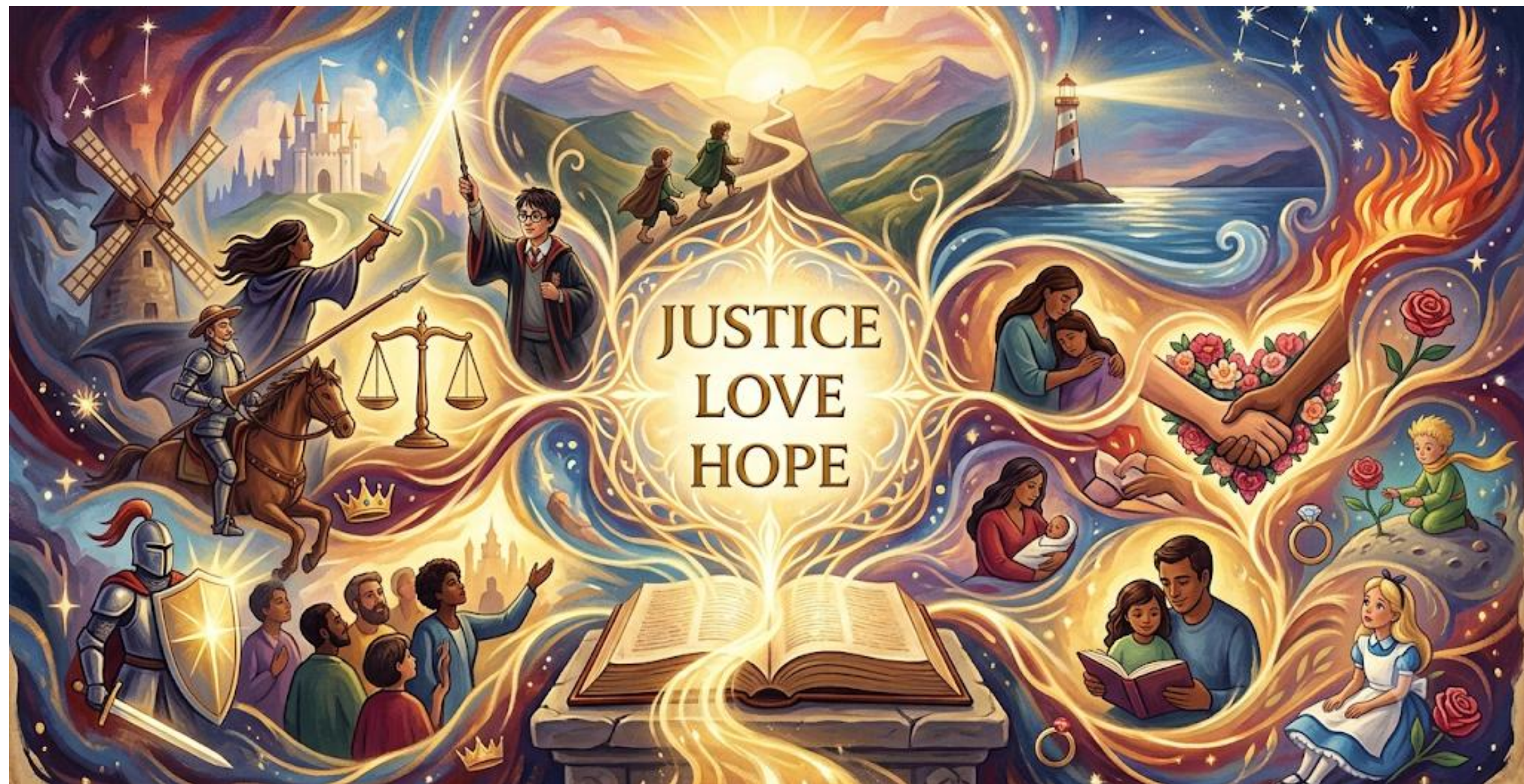
Top10 best selling books of all times

The All-Time Giants (Religious & Political)

- **The Bible** – Estimated **5 billion to 7 billion+ copies**.
- **The Quran** – Estimated **800 million to 3 billion copies**.
- **Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung** (*The Little Red Book*) – Estimated **800 million to 6.5 billion copies** due to mandatory distribution in China during the mid-20th century.

Source: blueroseone.com

Rank	Title	Author	Sales
1	Don Quixote	Miguel de Cervantes	500 M+
2	A Tale of Two Cities	Charles Dickens	200 M+
3	The Little Prince	Antoine de Saint-Exupéry	200 M
4	The Lord of the Rings	J.R.R. Tolkien	150 M
5	The Alchemist	Paulo Coelho	150 M
6	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	J.K. Rowling	120 M
7	And Then There Were None	Agatha Christie	100 M
8	Dream of the Red Chamber	Cao Xueqin	100 M
9	The Hobbit	J.R.R. Tolkien	100 M
10	Alice's Adventures in Wonderland	Lewis Carroll	100 M



- Many communication failures happen when environmental messages rely too heavily on fear, expert jargon or moral pressure.
- These approaches may be understandable, because environmental problems are urgent and serious.
- However, they can also produce distance, defensiveness or fatigue.
- Effective communication requires **a shift** *from simply informing* or alarming people *to engaging* them through clarity, relevance, trust, agency and carefully chosen frames.

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1. WHY ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION OFTEN FAILS

1.1. Why environmental communication often fails

- Important messages do not always become understood, trusted or acted upon.
- Environmental issues may be scientifically clear, morally important and socially urgent — and still fail to connect with the public.
- So the key question is not only: **“Is our message correct?”**
- The key question is also: **“Is it understandable, relevant, credible and actionable for the people we are trying to reach?”**

1.2. The communication paradox

Environmental issues are often:

- urgent
- complex
- long-term
- emotionally charged
- politically contested

Public communication needs to be:

- clear
- concrete
- relevant
- credible
- actionable



You speak the truth, but the public often needs very particular answers to the following questions:

- **What is happening?**
- **Why should I care?**
- **Who is affected?**
- **What can be done?**
- **What does this mean for my place, my family, my community, my future?**
- **How much does it cost? How much trouble for me and my family?**

1.3. A risky assumption

- **Risk No.1:** Assumption about the lack of knowledge: “If people knew more, they would care more and act differently.”
- More information **does not** automatically create engagement.
- Communication task is broader than giving information. It is about creating meaning, relevance and agency.
- People do not only ask: “Is this true?” **They also ask:** “***Does this concern me? Do I trust the messenger? Is this fair? Can anything still be done?***”

1.4. When messages do not connect?

Messages often fail when they are:

- too frightening
- too technical
- too abstract
- too moralising
- too distant from everyday life
- too unclear about what people can do

Environmental messages fail due to the way urgency is communicated: this brings us to *fear, alarm and fatigue*.

Instead we need:

to build understanding,
trust and action

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2. FEAR, FATIGUE AND CONSTRUCTIVE URGENCY

2.1. Why fear? Threats are real

- Environmental communicators quite often use fear **because the threats are real**:
 - Nature is being damaged. Species are disappearing. Habitats are being destroyed. Climate-related risks are increasing.
- Fear may make people stop and look.
- However: what's next?
- The need to distinguish between **alarm** and **constructive urgency**.



2.2. Why fear? Fear makes drama

- Fear seems to work quickly.
- Dramatic images, alarming headlines and strong warnings attract attention:
 - They are more visible in social media. They can be easier for media to pick up. They create emotional intensity.
- The problem begins when fear becomes the whole message.

2.3. When fear backfires

- Fear can produce very different reactions.
- Some people become motivated. But others shut down or may:
 - avoid the topic
 - feel powerless
 - become defensive
 - distrust the messenger
 - feel blamed or judged
 - stop listening

2.4. The danger of “doom-only” communication



https://www.wallpaperflare.com/action-apocalyptic-city-film-movie-sci-fi-terminator-wallpaper-qymek?__cf_chl_f_tk=WIE7YE1Yk08LEoVsAr0Up2GPOv0MdtIDNQEsvCS2BI-1783442767-1.0.1.1-perZoBFwyJ62WhjDZVIqqfhgLK5CuebvxsHVkvWtW4w

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/robot-apocalypse-terminator-matrix_n_1299858

2.5. Constructive urgency

Effective environmental communication combines:

- **urgency + agency**

It shows:

- what is at risk
- why it matters now
- what can still be done
- who can act
- what the next step is

2.6. From fear to agency

Better communication does not only say:

- “This is dangerous.”

It also says:

- “This is what can still be protected, changed or prevented.”
- **People need direction**



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3. Jargon, clarity and public meaning

3.1. Jargon, clarity and public meaning

- ... biodiversity, ecosystem services, habitat fragmentation, anthropogenic pressure, ecological connectivity, invasive species, Natura 2000, favourable conservation status....
- Professional jargon
- If fear creates emotional distance, jargon creates cognitive distance.

3.2. The expert trap

- Inside professional or activist communities, certain words feel natural.
- But when the same language is used with the wider public, it can create distance.
- The problem is not that the audience is incapable of understanding. The problem is that *the message has not been translated* into public meaning.

ChatGPT. Does it make sense?

From:

- “Habitat fragmentation is increasing due to anthropogenic pressure.”

To:

- “Natural areas are being cut into smaller, isolated pieces by roads, construction and intensive land use. As a result, animals and plants have fewer places to live, move and survive.”

3.3. Jargon is not only a language problem

Jargon does not only make communication harder to understand. It also affects the *relationship* between the communicator and the audience.

It can signal:

- “this is not for you”
- “experts own this topic”
- “ordinary experience does not count”
- “you need special knowledge to participate”

3.4. From expert language to public meaning

3 tips:

- Can a non-specialist understand this without previous knowledge?
- Does it explain why the issue matters?
- Could someone repeat this idea to another person?

The neighbour test

- Could an interested non-specialist understand this message after hearing it once?
- If not, the message needs work.

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4. Audiences, relevance and framing

4.1. Audiences, relevance and framing

Clear language matters. But clarity is always audience-specific.

A message can be clear in general, but still ineffective for a specific audience.

3 main questions:

- **audience** — **who** exactly are we trying to reach?
- **relevance** — **why** should this issue matter to them?
- **framing** — **how** do we present the issue so that people understand its meaning, responsibility and possible action?

4.2. There is no “general public”

Different audiences have different:

- knowledge
 - values
 - fears
 - interests
 - identities
 - constraints
- A **local resident** may ask: “Will this change my everyday life?”
 - A **journalist** may ask: “Is there a clear story here?”
 - A **politician** may ask: “Will this create conflict or public support?”
 - A **young person** may ask: “Does my action matter?”

4.3. Relevance is not automatic

- Environmental communicators often **assume** that the importance of nature protection is self-evident.
- But for many people, **relevance is not automatic**.
- A person **may agree** that biodiversity is important in general, but **still not understand** why a specific meadow, forest, river, species or planning decision **should matter to them now**.
- This is where we need to **connect environmental issues to people's real-life concerns**.

4.4. Framing (1)

Framing is one of the most important ideas in public communication.

It is the interpretive lens through which people understand an issue.

When we frame a problem, we guide people toward a certain interpretation:

- What is happening? Is this a crisis, a technical issue, a local identity issue, a health issue, an economic issue, a fairness issue, or a governance issue?

4.4. Framing (2)

For example, if we frame illegal waste dumping only as an environmental issue, some people may see it as distant.

But if we frame it as a public health, local pride and responsibility issue, it may become more meaningful to a broader audience.

Common environmental frames:

- crisis
- science
- health
- local identity
- economic resilience
- fairness / justice
- future generations
- solutions

4.4. Framing (3)

Good framing is not manipulation

Poor framing can create resistance

A better framing sequence:

- acknowledge concerns
- connect to shared values
- explain the issue
- show possible action

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5. Trust, stereotypes and the messenger effect

5.1. Trust, stereotypes and the messenger effect

- Even when the message is clear and well-framed, people still ask one more question: who is saying this? This brings us to **trust, stereotypes and the messenger effect**.
- We talked about *audiences*, *relevance* and *framing*.
- We asked: **whom** are we speaking to, **what** do they **care** about, and **how** can we **frame** the issue in a way that makes sense to them?
- Now we move to another important question: **who is speaking?**

5.2. Messenger effect: being right is not enough

- Public trust is not created by evidence alone
- **Credibility is not only about being correct. It is also about being perceived as trustworthy.**
- The same environmental message can produce different reactions depending on who says it.
- A strong communication strategy asks:
Who is the most trusted messenger for this audience and this goal?

5.3. Types of credibility

- **Expert credibility**
“I know the issue.”
- **Moral credibility**
“I care about the issue.”

Environmental organisations often rely on **expert credibility**: data, science, professional knowledge.

Activists often rely on **moral credibility**: commitment, urgency, responsibility, care.

- **Experiential credibility**
“I live with the issue.”
- **Relational credibility**
“I understand and respect you.”

Local people may have **experiential credibility**: they know the place, they live with the consequences, they have observed changes over time.

In difficult conversations, **relational credibility** becomes crucial: people need to feel that the communicator understands them, respects them and is not treating them as ignorant or morally inferior.

5.4. What matters a lot (1)

- Stereotypes
- Tone
- Moral superiority
- Visual identity and first impressions

5.4. What matters a lot (2)

STEREOTYPES

Environmental activists may be perceived as:

- radical
- naïve
- moralising
- anti-development
- anti-farmer
- elitist

tone

The same message can sound like:

- warning
- invitation
- accusation
- explanation
- judgement
- partnership



<https://unsplash.com/s/photos/climate-activism>

<https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2024-09-10/protest-is-everywhere-but-climate-activists-have-the-monopoly-on-art-for-now>

5.4. What matters a lot (3)

DANGER OF MORAL SUPERIORITY

People rarely become more open when they feel:

- blamed
- shamed
- humiliated
- dismissed
- treated as ignorant
- treated as morally inferior

VISUAL IDENTITY SPEAKS BEFORE WORDS

People notice:

- clothing
- symbols
- body language
- banners
- colours
- facial expressions
- protest style
- group image



5.5. Key idea

Do not only ask:
“What is our message?”

Also ask:
“Who is the most trusted person to carry it?”

The Elements of Communication (According to Mehrabian):

- **55% – Visual (Body Language):** Posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, and overall appearance.
- **38% – Vocal (Tone of Voice):** Pitch, volume, pacing, inflection, and pauses.
- **7% – Verbal (Words):** The actual spoken words and the literal content of the speech.

First impressions and emotional connection with an audience heavily depend on visual and vocal cues. If your body language projects anxiety or dishonesty, the audience will likely "reject" even the most brilliant text.

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6.1. Visual identity, media logic and social media

- A strong image can make the issue visible.
- A good media angle can bring the issue to a wider public.
- A clear social media post can mobilise action.

Opportunity, but with a dosage of risk.



6.2. Environmental activism is seen before it is explained

- Environmental communication is highly visual.
 - Visuals create the first interpretation of the issue.
 - **Visuals do not only illustrate the message. They frame the message.**
-

6.3. Visuals: do's and don'ts (1)

Good visuals can:

make invisible problems visible

show what is at stake

localise the issue

humanise the story

create emotional memory

show that action is possible

Disaster-only imagery. If people see only destruction, they may feel:

- fear
- sadness
- guilt
- helplessness
- fatigue
- distance

6.3. Visuals: do's and don'ts (2)

A strong visual story should not show only the endpoint of destruction. It should help people understand the full story.

- What is valuable here?
 - Who is connected to this place?
 - What is happening to it?
 - Who has responsibility?
 - What can still be done?
 - What does action look like?
-

6.4. Media logic: story comes first (1)

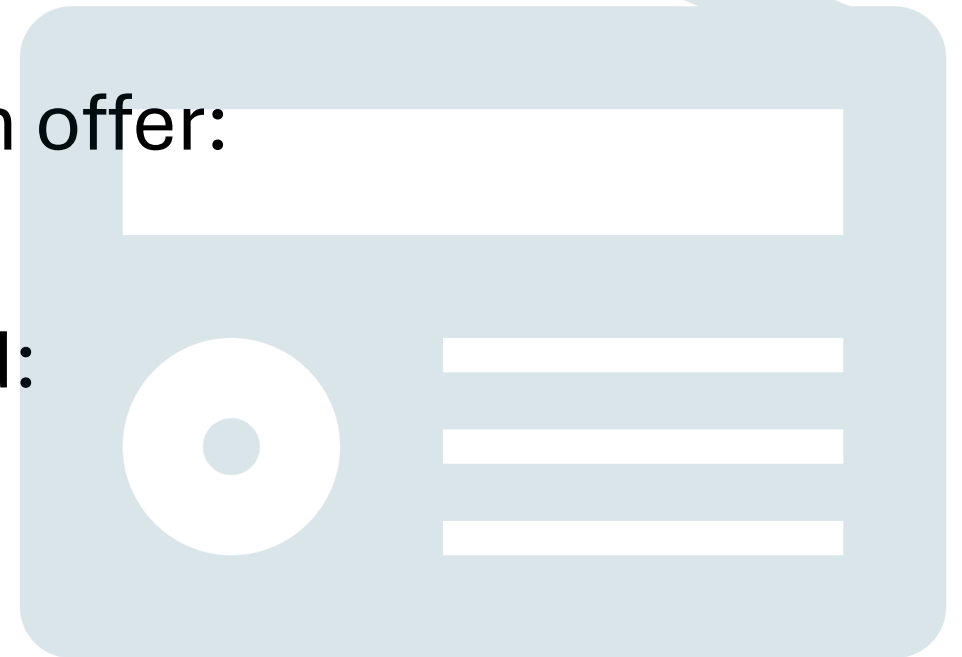


Environmental
communicators often offer:

- **a topic**

Journalists need:

- **a story**



6.4. Media logic: story comes first (2)

A media-ready environmental story needs:

- clear public relevance
- a timely hook
- a concrete case
- reliable evidence
- human angle
- local angle
- visuals
- available spokesperson

In interviews, avoid:

- long explanations
- too many numbers
- too much jargon
- unclear responsibility
- no concrete example
- no clear takeaway

6.5. Social media

It is a space for:

attention

identity

emotion

conflict

community

mobilisation

A post can:

- explain
- invite
- mobilise
- correct
- show
- thank
- pressure
- humanise

!!! One post – one job !!!

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SUMMA SUMMARUM

From message delivery to public engagement

Environmental communication is stronger when it moves beyond:

- fear without agency
- facts without relevance
- jargon without meaning
- messages without audiences
- activism without trust
- visibility without strategy

A stronger environmental message asks:

- Is it clear?
- Is it relevant?
- Is it trusted?
- Is it framed for the audience?
- Is it visually and emotionally balanced?
- Is there a realistic next step?

Do not make the problem smaller.

Make the path to engagement clearer.

**THANK YOU FOR
ATTENTION**