

Raul P. Lejano and Shondel J. Nero, **The Power of Narrative: Climate Skepticism and the Deconstruction of Science**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 200 pp., \$74.00 (hardcover), \$70.30 (eBook).

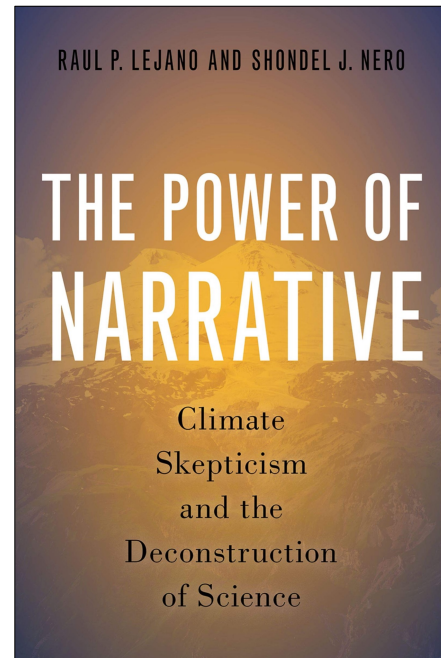
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The Power of Narrative: Climate Skepticism and the Deconstruction of Science, by Raul P. Lejano and Shondel J. Nero, is a multidisciplinary exploration of climate skepticism that will be of extraordinary value to anyone whose work concerns climate change research, activism, or media. Core to the central argument of the book is that researchers of sociology, the environment, communication, political science, and numerous other fields are missing a crucial piece of the climate skepticism puzzle. How did the climate skeptic movement become so powerful?

Cognitive dissonance regarding lifestyle choices (Sparks, Jessop, Chapman, & Holmes, 2010) surely has to do with climate skepticism, but so could psychological distance, which tells us that climate change is a far off and faraway phenomenon (McDonald, Chai, & Newell, 2015). Climate skepticism is also a result of external factors, like vast fossil fuel public relations funding, as well as the development of online echo chambers (Jamieson & Capella, 2008). Within this climate skeptic chaos lies the authors' pitch: The missing piece is *narrative*. Narrative weaves these contributors into a story that flows to populations that are now more invested in the climate skeptical ideology than ever.

The book is relatively free of technical jargon and is not freighted with excessive discussion of theory. Little background knowledge is required to understand the writing, although it would enhance the reader's experience to first review complementary works in the field, such as on echo chambers (Jamieson & Capella, 2008) and online misinformation (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). The book holds its focus narrowly on the climate crisis, only at times briefly mentioning other applications, but its conclusions could undoubtedly be applied to a variety of misinformation-driven movements. With this in mind, *The Power of Narrative: Climate Skepticism and the Deconstruction of Science* has a broader appeal than its full title implies—the book is not *about* climate change skepticism. Instead, it is about how science is communicated and how ideologies manifest and proliferate.

The book itself follows a narrative structure. After a short exposition, the authors deliver their prognosis: "Climate skepticism has become a full-fledged ideology" (p. 12). The book explores the current state of climate skepticism and sets guardrails: The authors immediately denounce the use of the term "climate denial" and posit that "climate skeptic" is both more politically and scientifically correct (p. 9).



Following the introduction, the book lays the foundation for the authors to later analyze examples of climate skeptical arguments. In chapter 2, the authors define ideology as “a narrative that forms a coherent systematic view of the world” (pp. 22, 138). *Ideology* as a concept recurs throughout the book and is the cornerstone of the argument. To identify evidence of ideology among skeptic rhetoric, the authors scan for three attributes: autopoiesis (self-containment or lack of references to other narratives), decontextuality (lack of reference to the outside world), and invariance (universality of claims; p. 33). These attributes are adapted from the works from a host of scholars—the foremost being Ricoeur (1981)—rather than being from a single definition of ideology. In essence, the authors assert that ideology cannot exist without narrative, and that the salience of climate skepticism as ideology is revealed by examining its underlying narratives.

Chapter 3 examines the chronological development of climate skeptical arguments from the United States. The authors represent the discourse through a selection of articles and op-eds found in conservative publications, which they analyze using the toolkit developed in the previous chapter. They skillfully avoid the trap of refuting misinformation on its merits. Online responses to the articles are also analyzed after 2009, which at times are difficult to read but do contribute to the authors’ ultimate finding for this chapter. Lejano and Nero find a long-term trend toward a hardened conservative skeptical ideology (p. 79). The finding is convincing, but could be strengthened by introducing a greater diversity of multimedia evidence sourced from video-sharing sites, podcasts, or television. Examples of skepticism in this chapter were exclusively text-based and were pulled from online newspapers, blogs, and comment boards. This shortcoming is most evident in this chapter but, unfortunately, is not limited to it; the book’s exclusive use of political cartoons in place of relevant photography or video stills fails to provide meaningful context and renders the work somewhat aloof and detached.

Chapter 4 explores narratives of climate skepticism in other countries in comparison to the United States. The authors analyzed datasets from numerous published studies for this chapter and found high levels of disagreement among them. For example, climate skeptics in the UK usually dismissed the issue due to a perceived lack of scientific consensus, whereas skeptics in the United States were more likely to believe in a global conspiracy (p. 88). Ironically, these findings should be taken with a dose of skepticism. In Germany, for example, the authors identified one survey that found a lower percentage of the German population to be climate deniers than in the United States, and a second that found it to be higher (p. 90). It appears that countries experience their own semi-isolated political weather systems, insulated by physical and linguistic borders. The authors also include a few paragraphs on climate skepticism in China, although good information is severely lacking, and they preface the chapter by acknowledging that neither reads Chinese (p. 91). This chapter, more than any other, calls for more research and for the harmonization of methodologies among researchers.

Taking an unexpected turn, the fifth chapter shines the light that was used earlier to examine the “other” back onto the climate movement itself. Lejano and Nero, perhaps somewhat controversially, delicately identify several examples of ideological discourse within the climate movement itself. They use strong language, here, so as not to equivocate this with climate skeptical ideology: “There is no attempt to [create ‘false equivalence’]; the two sides could not be less equivalent” (p. 133). Instead, the opportunity is used to encourage deep introspection. If a climate scientist, activist, or community leader only had the time to read one chapter of this book, this one must be it. However, like a Shyamalan plot twist, the beauty of this chapter may be invisible to those who skip the groundwork in the previous chapters. This literary reversal itself is a

triumph of narrative development. It is, after all, only fitting that a book about narrative hikes confidently up Freytag's Pyramid to this climax.

The concluding chapter reprises the lessons learned thus far, then distills them into practical recommendations for climate scientists to circumvent the ideological walls that were constructed over the past few decades. There are five proposals: "Change the Language" (p. 147), "Choose the Right Messengers or Storytellers" (p. 148), "Change the Communication Strategies in Mainstream and Social Media" (p. 149), "Conduct More Ethnographic Work on Climate" (p. 150), and "Teach Climate Change" (p. 150). These optimistic recommendations ground the book in reality and offer a tangible course of action for science communicators. Books about climate change are often emotionally draining to read and can lead to resignation rather than action. Knowing this, the authors avoided any attempt to refute the arguments of climate skeptics. The book feels remarkably fresh because it tracks steadily along the narrow path of rationality and does not get distracted by fraught engagements with the flawed arguments of those it studies. The result is an achievement of moderation and focus that is unique among media about science skepticism.

Lejano and Nero's *The Power of Narrative* traverses the crowded field of misinformation studies to offer valuable information on a notoriously slippery concept. Narratives permeate the climate skeptical movement and underpin its lasting appeal across borders. The power of narrative has been underestimated and understudied. To attenuate the ongoing and intensifying climate crisis, the "ideological war of words" (p. 151) will need to end.

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