

# America Adapts: The Value of Podcasting in Climate Communications

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As the realities of a changing global climate begin to reveal themselves, a shift in the climate conversation has begun to take shape. While climate change mitigation—efforts to reduce the human-induced changes to the climate due to fossil fuel emissions—dominated the discussion for much of the past three decades, climate change adaptation is now receiving newfound, and essential, attention in policy and planning circles. Climate change adaptation is defined by the U.S. government as “[a]djustment in natural or human systems to a new or changing environment that exploits beneficial opportunities or moderates negative effects.”<sup>1</sup> While this definition is appropriately clinical, the attention being placed on adaptation reflects a harsh, but inescapable reality: the warming of the planet has already begun in earnest, and the consequences of our past actions will now be felt. Active, thoughtful adaptation to those consequences is essential if we are to minimize the social, political, and financial disruptions that loom ahead.

However, discussion of climate adaptation needs to transcend the technical if it is going to move public opinion and create the sense of urgency in the general public that exists in the scientific community. The environmental movement has suffered from a perception of being excessively moralistic and preachy in the past, but in the case of climate change adaptation it may very well be time to alert the world to the immediate impacts that transcend the moral imperative. At a minimum, the adaptation community needs to assert its own leadership role in climate conversations and speak with both authority and the energy that this subject merits.

The community of adaptation professionals can struggle to speak with a clear and consistent voice around not only the adaptation steps prescribed, but the term itself. While technical definitions are essential to the scholarly literature on the topic, descriptions of adaptation that resonate with policy- and decision-makers are vastly more important. Creativity, emotion, and narrative will be essential to those descriptions.<sup>2</sup> It is critical to balance scientific precision with inescapable human experiences; to wit, while wildfires have existed in the American West for millennia, there is little doubt that climate change has made those fires more common, more intense, and more dangerous than almost any time human history. Wildfires aren’t a result of climate change, but the intensity of damage

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1 U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP). “Glossary” (2018), available at <https://www.globalchange.gov/climate-change/glossary>.

2 Morton, T.A. et al. “The future that may (or may not) come: How framing changes responses to uncertainty in climate change communications,” *Global Environmental Change*, 21 (2011), pp. 103-109. doi: 10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2010.09.013

and danger absolutely is.<sup>3</sup> By highlighting firefighters' wisdom about how they adapt their firefighting techniques or how victims seek to rebuild with greater engineering resilience, audiences benefit from a much deeper understanding of the connection between science and human capacity.

The foundational challenge faced by the adaptation community today is extending the scope of their project beyond narrow scientific, technical, and scholarly boundaries. Adaptation is an undertaking at a societal level that requires rethinking fundamental assumptions about geography, infrastructure, finance, risk, environmental stewardship, and social equity, while profoundly impacting the daily lives of many, if not all, Americans.

To meet this challenge will require building a sense of shared interest. While the concept of national unity and shared risk/interest is increasingly at odds with the current political environment, it is ever more critical to the challenge posed by a changing climate. The collective nature of the need for adaptation is at the core of the shift in worldview necessary to address the problem. For adaptation to happen, leaders in the field will need to build a shared awareness of adaptation itself, a shared body of knowledge from which decisions can result and strategies can be drawn, as well as a shared commitment to the long-term, distributed nature of this challenge.

Adaptation will not happen by accident. The rate at which the climate is changing will preclude "natural" or "market-driven" changes to human geography and lifeways. To be optimally effective and equitable, it must be intentional and proactive and, as such, it must be based in a shared awareness of the urgent need for adaptation. Although different geographic regions and demographic groups will experience climate change very differently, all will feel its effects profoundly, and some will experience first, second, and even third tier impacts as populations are displaced, economies are disrupted, and systems fail to endure these cascading shocks and stresses. It is essential that the public not only deepens its understanding of the climate crisis, but also engages with the certainty of adaptation as a necessary response. Government publications like the *National Climate Assessment* are useful as foundational documents, but insufficient for communicating to the public about these issues. Similarly, the adaptation community remains largely a practitioner and scholarly community with public messaging around the need for, and value of, adaptation being largely absent from popular discourse.

Adaptation remains a field in its infancy. Adaptation professionals are like small-town sheriffs in the old west attempting to bring some semblance of order to a chaotic, turbulent place in a time of change without more than a tenuous link to a central authority or policy-making base. While much good policy and decision-making is taking place, too often these processes are frustrated by a lack of reliable information, centralized resources, and access to peers. Whereas tools like vulnerability assessments and scenario planning documents

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3 Abatzoglou, J.T. and Williams, A.P. "Impact of anthropogenic climate change on wildfire across western US forests," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(42) (2016), pp. 11770-11775.

were the first to reach practitioners widely, in the absence of more sophisticated tools, these have become de facto approaches to adaptation planning and their shortcomings for this purpose are emerging more clearly. The private sector has begun to fill this void. Companies investing in Big Data are identifying ways to develop predictive models for risk assessment. These may not be the most thrilling applications of computing power, but they are critically important to planning exercises looking 30, 50, or 70 years in to the future.

Adaptation is, by any measure, a generational challenge. It is essential that the scope of that challenge not overshadow the equally enormous generational opportunity. Changes will undoubtedly put massive strain on social bonds and institutions, and the potential for instability is enormous. The challenge for society is to infuse more urgency into this cause. And that will require new and innovative ways to communicate this issue. That's where a climate change podcast can be a meaningful first step.

## Climate Change and Podcasting

The field of climate communications is littered with unsuccessful efforts that attempt to make climate change relevant to the general public. Unfortunately, climate change is an incredibly complex subject, laden with uncertainty and nuance. Worst of all, it is often framed by dire predictions. All of these qualities make it increasingly hard to reach audiences with compelling messages and actionable knowledge. Some of the most seemingly successful efforts at climate communication often repeat the habit of just “preaching to the choir.” By failing to reach a broader audience—often incidental to the doom and gloom—climate change communicators miss the chance to engage the full range of stakeholders necessary for informed climate action.

People are desperate to learn about the world around them. The central challenge for technical subjects like climate change is that much of that learning must happen in non-technical ways. Even adaptation professionals are looking for avenues to understand adaptation outside of formal webinars and scientific reports. Podcasts offer a potentially impactful mechanism to disseminate substantive information to a broad array of audiences.

Podcasts represent an entirely new platform for sharing information in accessible, yet substantive ways. Functionally, podcasts are “a digital audio file made available on the Internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, new installments of which can be received by subscribers automatically.”<sup>4</sup> More practically, podcasts are the equivalent of always-available, downloadable radio talk-show broadcasts. In much the same way that companies like Netflix have taken television shows from time-specific broadcasts to on-demand streaming, podcasts do the same for audio recordings and broadcast radio. Moreover, they allow listeners to carefully select subject matter, content, and host, as well as the time and place they consume that content.

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4 Podcast Insights. “Podcast Statistics” (2018), available at <https://www.podcastinsights.com/podcast-statistics/>.

The unique appeal of the podcast as a platform lies in its availability, specificity, and accessibility:

- **Availability:** Conventional radio broadcasts exist in real-time—miss them and they are gone. Podcasts remain permanently archived, available, and referenceable.
- **Specificity:** The pleasures of generalist listening are enormous, but pursuing a depth of interest in a subject is similarly satisfying. Podcasts can cater to small audiences with very specific interests. There are podcasts on paleobotany, the art of negotiation, and even Australian lifeguard competitions. By catering to specific audiences and subpopulations, podcasts can message most effectively to the groups most interested in their content.
- **Accessibility:** Podcasts present information in the form of a conversation. In fact, listeners often describe themselves as feeling that they are part of the conversation that they are listening to. Podcasts are rarely formatted as lectures, and the audio nature of the medium means that they do not require exclusive attention.

Podcasting emerged in 2004, led into the public eye largely by avatars of pop culture and comedy cultural critics like Marc Maron and Ricky Gervais. Podcast appeal broadened rapidly with creative applications of the technology, with the Harry Potter-centered *Muggle-cast* and true-crime *Serial* being prominent examples. By 2012, 29 percent of Americans had listened to a podcast. Today, that figure is 44 percent and over 500,000 podcasts are actively broadcast in over one-hundred languages. While most of those podcasts have a small listenership, those listeners are dedicated—73 million Americans are estimated to listen to a podcast at least every month; 48 million listen weekly.<sup>5</sup> Both numbers have grown consistently and steadily.

Podcasting represents a unique opportunity for messaging and engagement because the barriers to entry and exposure are so low. Production challenges and costs are marginal. There are few barriers to access and marketing often happens organically within communities. The technology for podcast recording is quite simple; inexpensive software tools allow for audio recording, editing, and production. In-person interviews can be conducted with a basic smartphone. Off-site interviews simply require a service like Skype or Zoom to ensure audio quality. There is, of course, a learning curve both around the technical aspects and the challenges of delivering good content, but neither are so difficult as to be problematic for an engaged learner. Distributing a podcast is similarly straightforward with services like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Pandora, and I Heart Radio all providing users access to podcasts, with Apple being the largest (65 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Promoting a podcast happens largely through social media and organic channels within an industry sphere. Word-of-mouth remains the most compelling means by which news of a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

quality resource is shared, but active promotion by trusted partners, colleagues, and network associates is essential to publicizing a podcast. Fortunately, once the word is shared, podcast distributors make it easy for listeners to find what they are looking for. The search functions in each service are optimized for keywords and very effective at connecting audiences to their sought-after content.

While recording and publishing a podcast is a relatively inexpensive undertaking, only the most successful podcasts are financially lucrative. Podcasts reaching truly wide audiences or key demographics are largely supported by advertising and corporate sponsorships. Podcasts that are more narrowly focused, or educational in nature, are most often funded by grants, voluntary listener contributions, or online funding campaigns. Some podcasts hosted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are nonprofit entities funded by traditional charitable giving channels. In some instances, where the podcast and an organization have shared interests, single episodes can be sponsored in return for a focus on a specific subject or event.

### **The America Adapts Podcast**

As the world's most popular climate change podcast, *America Adapts* is one of the first efforts to use podcasting to educate professionals and the public about climate change adaptation. The *America Adapts* podcast is a platform for sharing knowledge, information, and opinion across the field of climate adaptation. The show's mission is to catalyze global-scale connections between experts and information on climate adaptation practice and research. *America Adapts* seeks to enhance the visibility of adaptation research and current interventions to impacts of climate change, connect professionals and their efforts to maximize the resource base, and to increase the efficiency, efficacy and equity by which we can prepare and respond. *America Adapts* communicates critical issues on a real-time platform through interviews with scientists, activists, policy makers and journalists seeking to reach the public with their work and findings. Finally, it seeks to inspire the public with a message of hope and possibilities balanced with an emphasis on the critical need to make changes.

The *America Adapts* podcast includes more than 95 episodes, featuring experts from public health, planning, national security, agriculture, conservation, to landscape architecture. Adaptation is an issue relevant to almost every economic sector. That interdisciplinary nature is a key part of the podcast's value: it highlights areas of adaptation that many, even those working in the field, did not know existed. Recent examples include:

- A conversation with *Vox*'s David Roberts dug into the philosophical considerations of adaptation.
- An interview with adaptation expert Dr. Susie Moser discussed how adaptation will drive transformational changes in our society.

- Jeff Goodell, an environmental writer with *Rolling Stone* magazine, discussed his recent book that looks at the ramifications of coastal inundation in major cities around the world.

Alongside the need for a more sophisticated national conversation around adaptation is an emerging need for America to engage with the world on this topic. With the announcement of the new International Commission on Adaptation there is a growing sense to create some unity in the field. In the U.S., we often go our own way on consequential environmental policy issues. But, there is value in integrating domestic efforts with overseas adaptation efforts. *America Adapts* has developed a listener base in over 75 countries where the interest in understanding what the U.S. is doing on adaptation is substantial.

Here in America, we also have much to learn from our international partners. Many countries are quite advanced—the Netherlands has been the focus of several episodes of the podcast. That said, much of the policy and funding emphasis for adaptation has been focused on developing countries, and rightly so, since many of them will bear the brunt of climate impacts for decades to come. There are very few national platforms to talk about adaptation. The biannual National Adaptation Forum has emerged as an essential gathering of adaptation professionals. Likewise, a number of trade associations are in early stages of formation, but no platforms exist that provide a recurring conversation about this issue that is both substantive and accessible. *America Adapts* seeks to fill the void.<sup>7</sup>

*America Adapts* listeners include academics, nonprofit organizations, students (middle school to university level), the general public, and leading experts in adaptation in state and federal government agencies. One of the most interesting developments since the podcast was launched is the community of adaptation professionals that has arisen around the podcast and its various social media platforms. The podcast has become a shared space of information exchange for students and professionals alike. The field of adaptation is so diverse, touching up on so many sectors, that no single platform can accommodate them all. The podcast, and the conversations that unfold there, begin to fill that void. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram create a space where listeners can both provide feedback to the show, but also amongst themselves, independent of the show itself. The podcast becomes a prompt for critical conversations, and inspiration for debate and networking amongst key stakeholders. Generally, you think of a podcast as a one-way conversation, but social media allows people to share feedback on the content covered, talk about what they agreed or disagreed with and, most importantly, share ideas for future content. The community around *America Adapts* is diverse, international and growing; it provides a real-time illustration of how adaptation is evolving around the world.

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7 Balasubramanian, M. "Climate change, famine, and low-income communities challenge Sustainable Development Goals," *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 2(10) (2018), e421-e422.

For nonprofits who seek to engage in their own podcast productions, they may not necessarily feel the obligation to bind themselves to the rules of journalism. For some, podcasts are simply a means of informative entertainment. Yet, for others, podcasts are becoming a valuable tool for educating their constituents. For instance, university academics have begun to incorporate *America Adapts* episodes into their curriculum in a variety of fields. An initiative called Podcasts in the Classroom is being led by a faculty member at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. The Waterloo team is developing templates that people can use when they listen to the *America Adapts* podcast. Soon, similar templates will be available to nonprofits and community development organizations who will then have a model for optimizing engagement in both the digital and physical worlds. Bridging a digital listener together with an active real-world stakeholder is the next challenge ahead for the diffusion of various innovations arising from podcasts.

## Conclusions

Unique problems often demand, and generate, unique solutions. A societal-level response to the challenge posed by climate change demands creative, multi-modal thinking about education, conversation, knowledge-sharing, and consensus-building. For a civilization-scale project like adaptation to climate change, making use of every available resource to move public awareness and understanding is essential. In that regard, podcasting represents a low-cost, readily accessible channel for reaching policy makers, leaders, professionals, and the general public with information that is accessible, digestible, and meaningful. Moreover, podcasting can engage audiences in times, places, and contexts where learning is a pleasure rather than a chore. Climate change professionals, as well as science educators and leaders more broadly, would be wise to explore podcasting as a means to share their messages more broadly and to build public understanding of the challenges facing our collective communities. Moreover, they may be missing out on some key conversations about real life experiences that are fundamentally defining the nature of vulnerability, adaptive capacity, and transformative adaptation.

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