

Communicating Nature

*How We Create and Understand
Environmental Messages*



Julia B. Corbett

COMMUNICATING NATURE: HOW WE CREATE AND UNDERSTAND ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGES. JULIA B CORBETT. WASHINGTON, DC: ISLAND PRESS; 2006. 364 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$60.00. SOFTCOVER \$29.50. ISBN 1-59726-067-3 (HARDCOVER), 1-59726-068-1 (SOFTCOVER).

Julia Corbett's *Communicating Nature* is an interesting, scholarly look at how people come to understand nature and how different types of communicators—including advertisers, public-relations practitioners, and reporters—use nature in their messages. The book is unapologetically pro-environment.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. It is a textbook, but it doesn't pretend to teach from an unbiased standpoint. Corbett, an associate professor of communication at the University of Utah, certainly knows as well as any of us that unbiased communication doesn't exist. Her proenvironmental stance in this book is probably more honest than would be that of someone who claims to be simply a reporter of the facts.

One of Corbett's themes is that people in Western culture, particularly Americans, are greedy when it comes to consumer goods. We want to live the good life—the American dream—and have been told from birth that it's our right to climb as high as we can through hard work. The reward for that hard work is money, whose purpose is to buy *things*. And more money can buy even more things. She refers to our consumer culture as the “buyosphere”.

She points out that many so-called green messages are simply propaganda used by advertisers and businesses to get a bite of the disposable income of well-meaning, and for the most part environmentally clueless, consumers. The things we might buy on the basis of those messages include hybrid cars, eco-vacations, goods made of recycled paper, and on and on. And we usually don't look very closely at the “green” claims made by advertisers.

But the book is far from a diatribe. It's densely packed with facts from studies and interesting case histories supplemented by the occasional black-and-white illustration or piece of art. Its 300-plus pages are divided into 10 sections, followed by notes for each chapter and an extensive index.

It was a great primer on environmental communication for this reviewer, whose background is in reporting on the physical, rather than biologic or environmental, sciences.

The book begins by explaining how people form their beliefs about the environment, both by immersion in their current culture, which is itself a result of specific events in history, and through the influence of their own experiences of nature in childhood and their parents' and other opinion leaders' beliefs about nature.

Corbett goes on to discuss a wide variety of environmental belief systems, running from anthropomorphism at one extreme (the environment exists to serve humans) to ecocentrism at the other extreme (humans are just one part of the environment, which is all). She explains that *environmentalism* is a blanket term that covers diverse beliefs and that someone who is an environmentalist may have a completely different take on what that means from someone else who also considers herself or himself an environmentalist.

One section of the book deals with the intersection of environmental beliefs and the behaviors that people exhibit as a result of those beliefs. Corbett explains that there is no “magic bullet” message to turn people into green-believers who exhibit desired “green” behaviors. She says that targeted messages at all levels—individual, societal, governmental, global—are needed.

Another section discusses the use of nature for entertainment and enjoyment, including tourism. Here Corbett's point seems to be that even “eco-tourism” is not healthy for the environment in the long run; it takes what is essentially good and turns it into a consumable commodity. Businesses take nature and package it and sell it to us for vacations, urging us to shop and buy more and more.

An interesting part of the book deals with how the advertising industry uses nature to its advantage. Corbett asks whether “green advertising” is a contradiction. Can something whose goal is to increase consumerism ever really be green? She explains that Americans are exposed to 3,000 ads each day, not only through television and other media but simply in the logos on clothing. Advertising is so pervasive, she says, that we can never truly escape it.

News media are also addressed in Corbett's book. She strives to explain how

newsrooms work and how they cover the environment. Corbett goes into detail about the growth of the environment “beat” reporter and discusses the levels of decision-making that go on in newsrooms, from editors to reporters, and their roles as “gatekeepers”. This information may not surprise professional communicators reading the book, but it will be informative for others.

Corbett also deals with public-relations practitioners, pointing out differences in how they operate when working for the government versus corporate entities. Corporate PR, she says, is involved in “greenwashing”—that is, spending millions of dollars to make its activities appear “green” while not really changing its way of doing business.

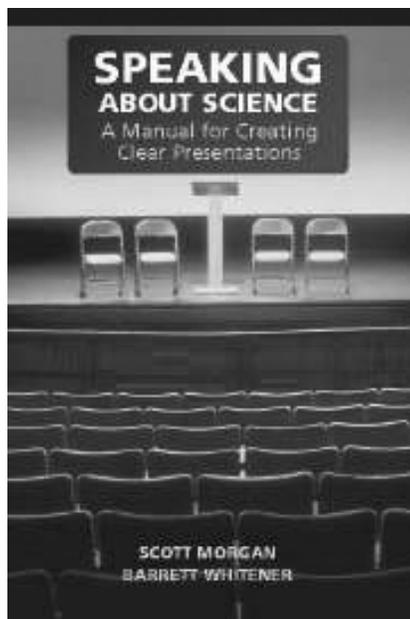
All in all, this book was an eye-opener for me. I confess that before reading it I did not recognize the complexity—and

yes, the deception—that can be found in environmental messages. From now on, I think I will scrutinize environmental ads, newspaper stories, and even government press releases more closely.

I can easily recommend this book to anyone working in communication today and certainly anyone working in an environmental job. The book is dense—it really reminds me of the tomes on mass communication I read as a journalism major in college—but it will make a great reference book for your shelf. I wish it had been on the syllabus when I was a journalism major.

Rebecca Johnson

REBECCA JOHNSON is editor of *StarDate* magazine, which is published by the University of Texas at Austin McDonald Observatory.



SPEAKING ABOUT SCIENCE: A MANUAL FOR CREATING CLEAR PRESENTATIONS. SCOTT MORGAN AND BARRETT WHITENER. NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS; 2006. X+126 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$60.00, SOFTCOVER \$22.99. ISBN-10 0-521-86681-2, ISBN-13 978-0-521-86681-1 (HARDCOVER), ISBN-10 0-521-68345-9, ISBN-13 978-0-521-68345-6 (SOFTCOVER).

Speaking in public is a common cause of fear, especially among scientists accustomed to spending their days in laboratory environments. Scott Morgan and Barrett Whitener, professional public speakers, drew on their vast experience in giving and attending scientific presentations to create *Speaking about Science*, which is just what its subtitle suggests: *A Manual for Creating Clear Presentations* and much more. The book follows a logical progression, much as a good presentation should, allowing readers to easily follow the step-by-step process outlined therein. The methods presented build cumulatively, and readers would do well to heed the authors' suggestion to read the book from cover to cover the first time through.

The book opens with an introduction by the two authors describing their inspiration for creating this manual and its purpose: “to offer a methodical and efficient procedure that can be used to prepare and deliver any talk, to any audience”.

Each chapter, including the introduction and conclusion, begins with a relevant quotation. The quotations range from humorous (“Before I came here I was confused

about this subject. Having listened to your lecture I am still confused. But on a higher level.”—Enrico Fermi) to provocative (“Science is not the dispassionate analysis of impartial data. It is the human, and thus passionate, exercise of skill and sense on such data.”—Philip Hilts).

The first chapter deals with the basic problems of, and corresponding solutions to, giving a clear scientific presentation. To assuage the fears of those who may think the ability to give a cogent presentation is in the genes, so to speak, the authors, who teach presentation skills to scientists at the National Institutes of Health, assure readers that “giving an effective presentation is more a matter of method than of talent.” Scientists actually have an advantage when presenting: The scientific method they use to arrive at their results provides an engaging framework for building a presentation and a logical storyline that an audience can follow. The trick is to engage listeners and lead them through the presentation methodically.

Chapters 2 through 5 outline how to create the presentation itself. Morgan and Whitener introduce their “Hour Glass

Format” for the presentation and, using key words to help the speaker assemble data in the proper order, guide oration and slide choice with a seven-step preparation process. By deciding first on the “Take Home Message” (the most important idea of the talk), the speaker can filter out extraneous information and easily pare down information to fit the time allotted. Working backward provides the framework for a clear, focused, and uncluttered presentation.

Preparing the introduction, conclusion, and title of the talk last allows the speaker to adapt the core presentation to different audiences. Worksheets to prepare appropriate introductions are included in an appendix, as are examples of introductions for audiences of various backgrounds.

The next two chapters deal with the delivery and the question-and-answer portion of the presentation. The authors identify nervousness as the obvious, “nearly universal” challenge to presenting; however, they insist that nerves create the spark that is necessary for an engaging talk, and they suggest how speakers can harness this energy. Constructive (and destructive) rehearsal methods, drills on improving vocal tone and diction, and tips on using accents and mannerisms are included in this section.

Chapters 8 and 9 present techniques for successful job and mass-media interviews,

respectively. To prepare for a job interview, the authors recommend using some of the same approaches used to prepare a presentation. The chapter on mass-media interviews acknowledges the growing public thirst for scientific news, claiming that all scientists must be ready for their research to become a “hot topic” and must therefore be prepared to face the media.

“The media interview is an information exchange like no other,” the authors state. “In a media interview, one’s words are recorded for all time.” Daunting, no doubt, but the authors provide ways in which scientists can be prepared for an interview even if they are caught unaware by a reporter. They distinguish broadcast from print media and features from news stories but maintain that all journalists will be interested in the take-home message. The authors suggest proper attire for a television interview, mechanisms for avoiding controversial statements, methods for preparing sound bites and quotes, and ways to refuse an interview. This chapter is particularly relevant for media coaches and others who are teaching scientists how to interact with the press.

The final chapter is devoted to organizing and presenting posters effectively. The same key terms and methods for creating clear presentations are used here once again, illustrating their versatility, and

examples of posters are included in a second appendix.

If the book has a fault, it is the alternating use of the masculine and feminine pronoun in every other chapter, supposedly to enhance readability while avoiding gender bias. It is an unnecessary hindrance that is increasingly irritating as the book progresses.

That small annoyance aside, *Speaking about Science* accomplishes its goal. Morgan and Whitener have presented a model for creating a focused scientific presentation that enables a speaker to convey highly complicated data to almost any audience in the time allotted.

This manual will provide speakers, whether amateur presenters or uneasy veterans, with accessible solutions to the most prevalent presentation problems. Using this book as a guide, any speaker can make presentations clearer and more engaging. With thorough preparation and delivery methods that promote maximal retention, communication of complex ideas becomes a straightforward, manageable, and even enjoyable endeavor.

SHAUNA B KANEL, *who recently completed her master’s degree in molecular genetics at the University of California, San Diego, prepared this review while a Science Editor intern.*