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Pitfalls in the communication about CO2 capture and storage

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One of the greatest environmental challenges the world is facing today is combating global warming. Global warming is largely due to growing concentrations of human-induced CO₂ emissions. One of the solutions to mitigate these emissions is the implementation of CO₂ capture and storage (CCS). CCS is a controversial technology, and attitudes towards it are influenced by public communications. Proponents as well as opponents use persuasive communication techniques to convince the public of their views. Examples of such techniques are conveying lots of information at one time (heaping), giving more weight to either advantages or disadvantages (emphasis framing), and citing pro-environmental motives for involvement with CCS (greening). These techniques tend to be judged on their effectiveness but, up till now, less attention went to how (unfavorable) recipients might evaluate a communication in which persuasive techniques are applied as well as the source that produced it. Yet, these message and source evaluations are important because they can have long-term costs for the communicators' reputation and performance. Because message and source evaluations are rather neglected, it might appear as if it is effective to apply persuasive techniques to the communication about CCS, while possible negative side-effects stay undetected. Stated differently, communication about CCS can have pitfalls.

The experimental and survey research presented in this dissertation identified pitfalls in the use of heaping, emphasis framing, and greening. That is, the results show that irrelevant details can dilute the persuasiveness of a relevant message, giving more weight to either advantages or disadvantages is perceived as manipulative—even as illegitimate when people expect informative communications—and citing pro-environmental motives for involvement with CCS can be perceived as greenwashing. Furthermore, the research reveals the psychological processes underlying these pitfalls and their boundary conditions. Expectations about the communication source appear to play an important role in how the use of persuasive techniques is perceived. To avoid long-term negative perceptions, stakeholders with an interest in CCS can best take people's source expectations into account and provide a relevant, balanced and credible message about the technology.

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