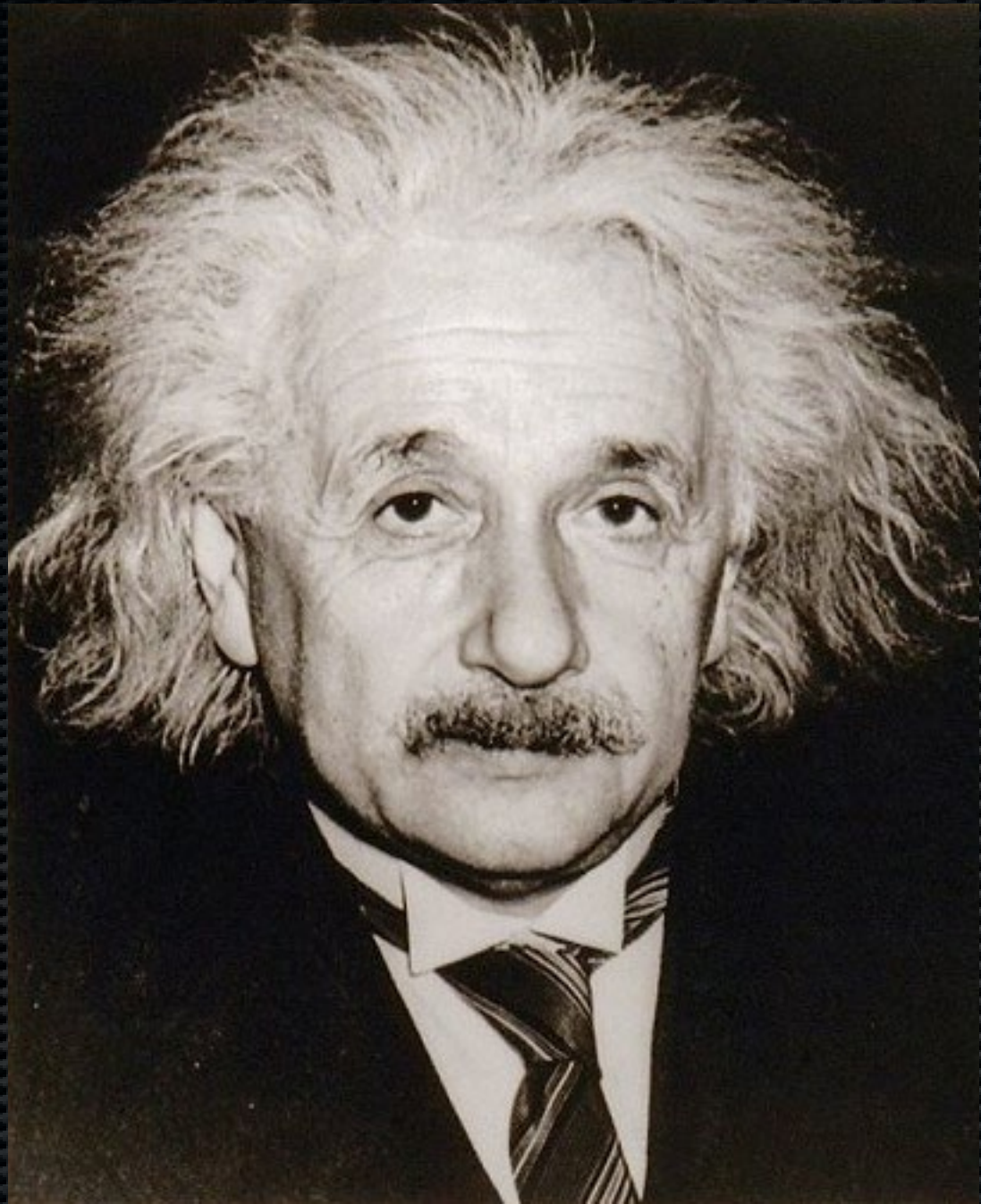# The science of public health messaging: Two guiding heuristics

Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit (PEHSU) Annual Meeting
June 3rd, 2019
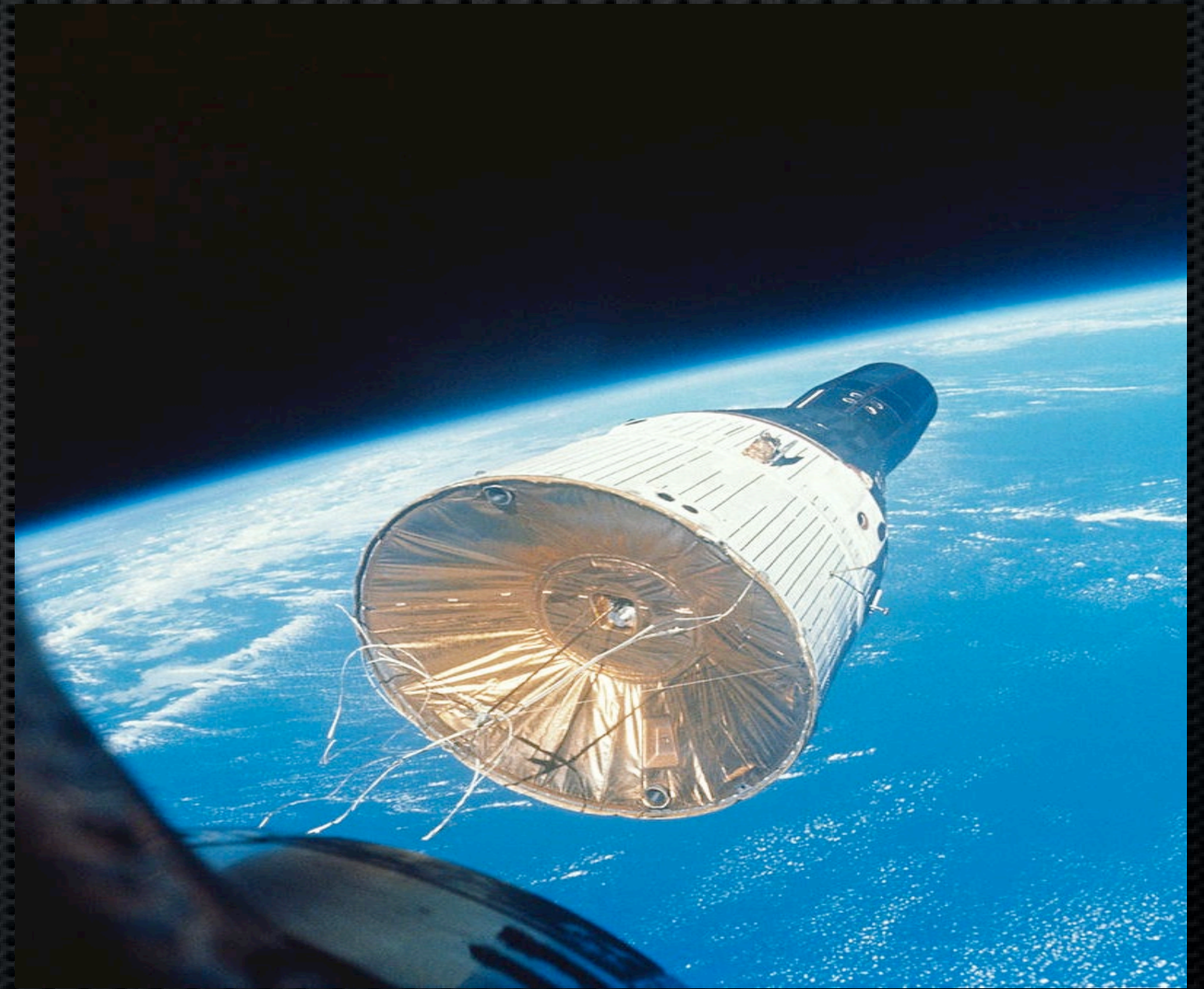
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
CENTER *for* CLIMATE CHANGE
COMMUNICATION

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"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."

Spreading important ideas and facilitating behavior change are two distinct challenges

To mount the challenge of spreading important ideas…

The guiding heuristic is:

**Simple clear messages,
repeated often,
by a variety of trusted
voices.**

About "Simple clear messages,…":

1. The less you say, the more you're heard.

2. Say the things that have the most value (in achieving your communication objective).*
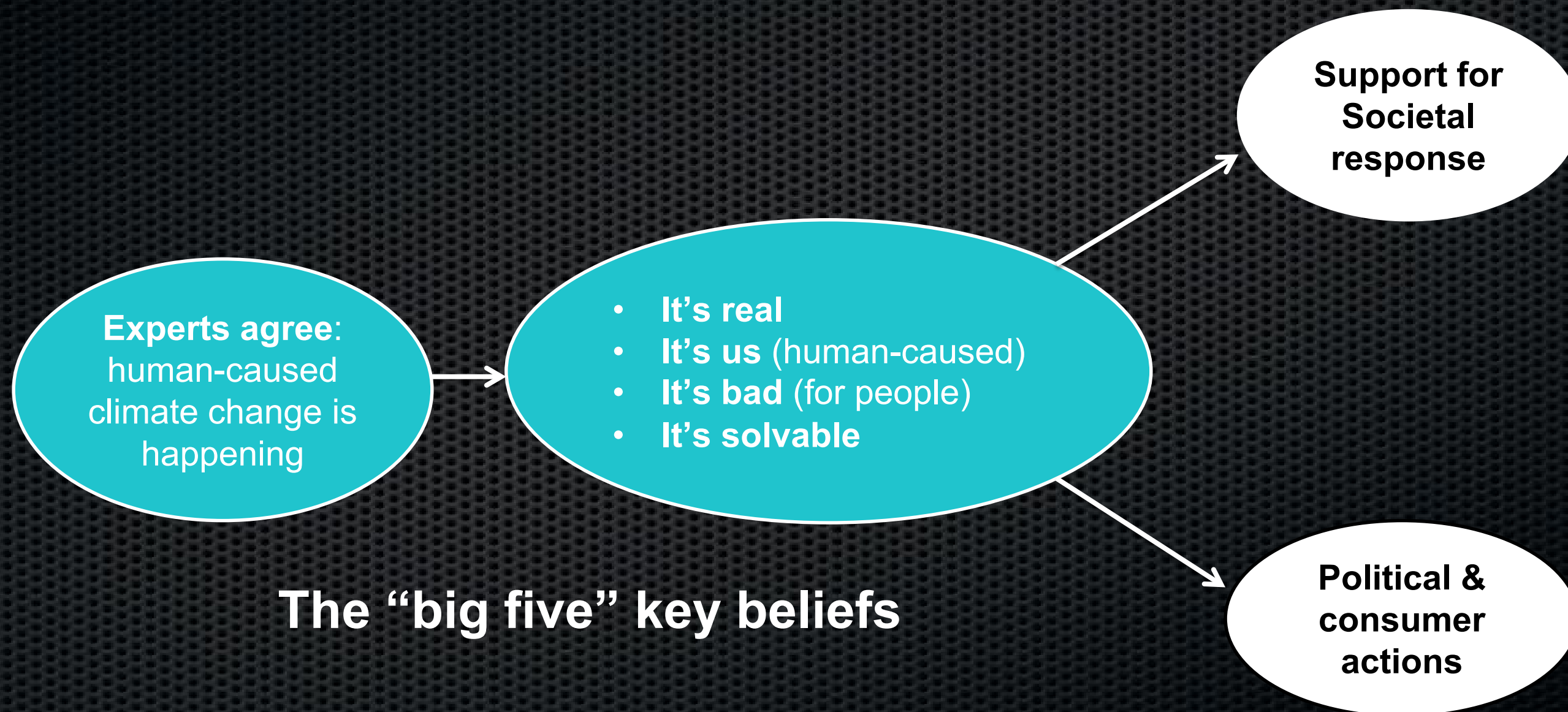
   * Never lose sight of the fact that people simplify. Our job as science communicators is to help them simplify appropriately.

3. When possible, use audience research to determine which messages have most value.
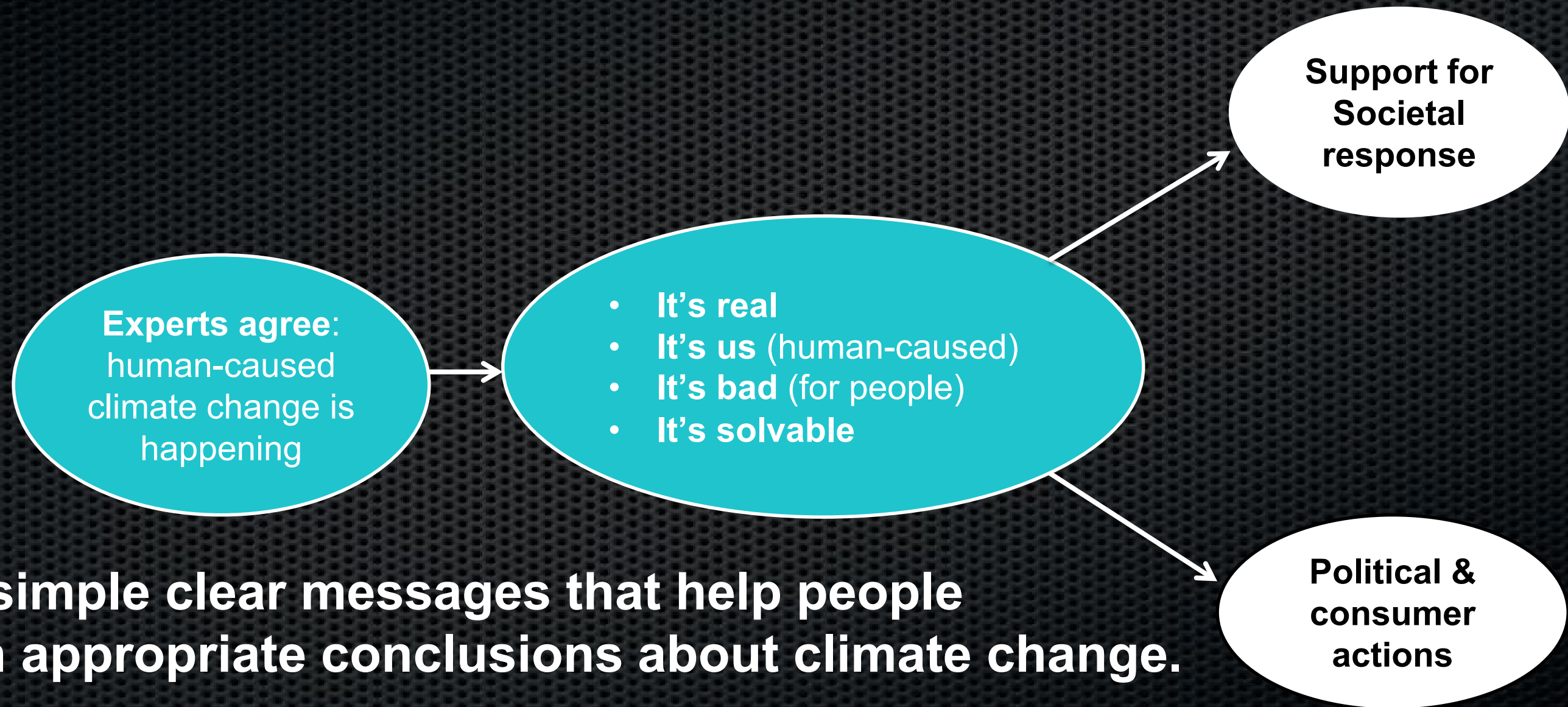
Key beliefs about climate change → "Appropriate" attitudes & actions

Experts agree: human-caused climate change is happening

- **It's real**
- **It's us** (human-caused)
- **It's bad** (for people)
- **It's solvable**

Support for Societal response

Political & consumer actions

The "big five" key beliefs

Sources: Ding-Ding *et al.,* 2012; Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2012; Roser-Renouf *et al.,* 2014; Krosnick *et al.,* 2006

Key beliefs about climate change → **"Appropriate" attitudes & actions**

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Support for Societal response

Political & consumer actions

Five simple clear messages that help people reach appropriate conclusions about climate change.

Sources: Ding-Ding *et al.,* 2012; Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2012; Roser-Renouf *et al.,* 2014; Krosnick *et al.,* 2006

About "…repeated often,…":

1. Repetition is the mother of learning, liking, and trust.

2. Adapt your messages, elaborate them, but no matter what…find ways to say them early and often.

3. Find ways to reinforce (i.e., repeat) the words with visual images and verbal images (i.e., metaphors).

There is a simple rule: You say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and then again and again and again and again, and about the time that you're absolutely sick of saying it is about the time that your target audience has heard it for the first time."

-- Republican message strategist

About "…by a variety of trusted voices.":

1. Determine who is most trusted (because it may not be you), and/or who else is trusted besides you and your colleagues.

2. Ask those trusted messengers to convey your message, and make it easy for them to do so.

3. Ideally, your messages should be so simple and clear that members of your target audience will start repeating them to their friends, family members and colleagues. Remember: they are your audiences' <u>most-trusted</u> sources.

To enhance the odds of success, create a team.

Effective science communication is a team effort.

The team positions include:
* Content experts
* Social/decision science experts
* Communication practitioners

Fischhoff, B. (2007) Non-persuasive Communication about Matters of Greatest Urgency: Climate Change. *Environmental Science & Technology Online*. 41:7204-8.

To mount the challenge of changing people's behavior…

The guiding heuristic is:

Do everything possible
to make the behavior
you wish to encourage:
- **Easy**
- **Fun &**
- **Popular**

To make the behavior "easy":

1. Identify the barriers that make it hard for people to adopt the behavior you are promoting.*
   *This is done through audience research.

2. Create programs or resources that lower those barriers.

3. Create opportunities to demonstrate (aka model) the behavior <u>and</u> its positive outcomes.♦
   ♦This will increase audience awareness, knowledge, self-efficacy, & expectations of benefits. (Benefits are fun!)

To make the behavior "fun":

1. Identify the benefits that your <u>audience members</u> care most about (not the ones <u>you</u> care most about), and highlight those benefits when promoting the behavior.

2. Do everything possible to deliver immediate positive reinforcement for adopting the behavior.

3. If possible, make the behavior fun. Literally.

To make the behavior "popular":

1. Publicize notable people who are already embracing the behavior.

2. Identify the "opinion leaders" in your target audience; spend whatever time is necessary to win them over as your allies.

3. As the behavior becomes more normative – i.e., more popular – show members of your target audience how popular it is becoming (i.e., demonstrate the new social norm).

An example: *Climate Matters*

Climate Matters **is a resource program that encourages and enables local TV weathercasters to report on the local impacts of climate change.**

The idea we are spreading:
Global climate change is changing the weather in your community, for the most part not for the better.

The behavior we are promoting:
Reporting on the <u>local</u> impacts of global climate change.
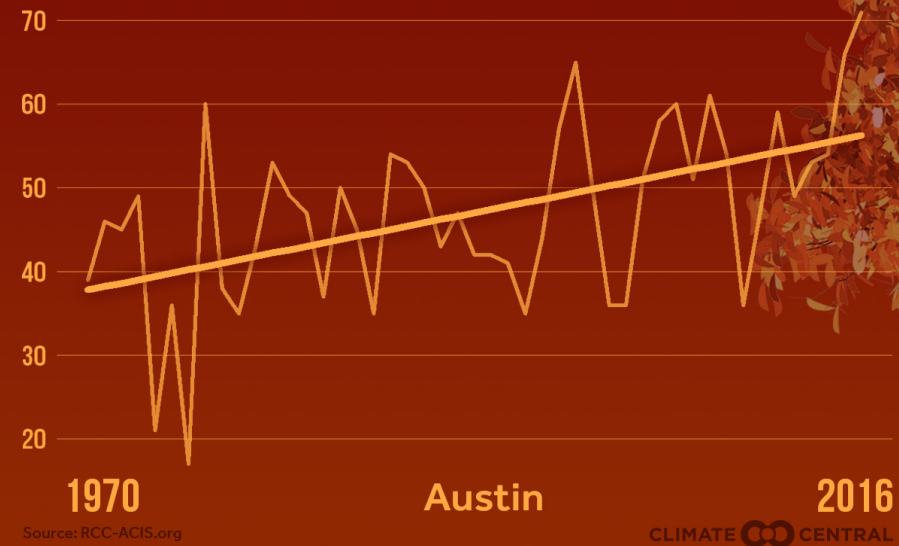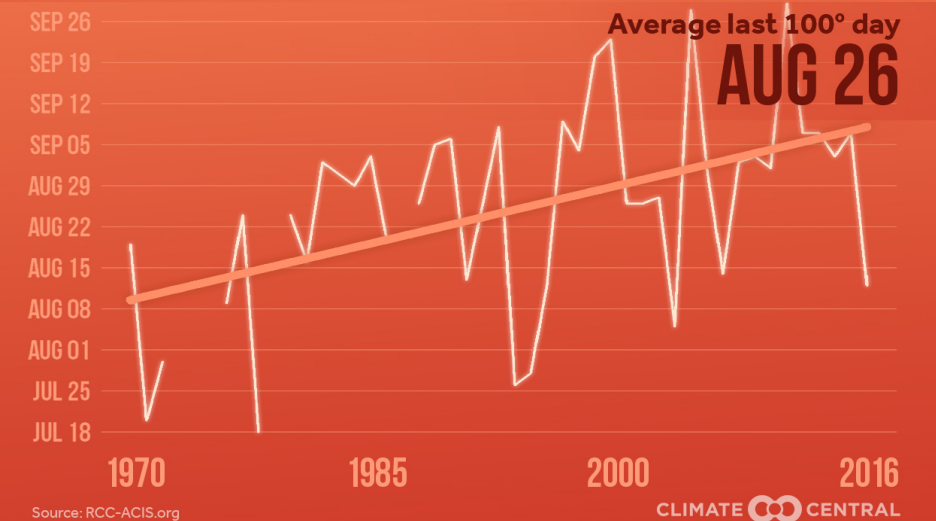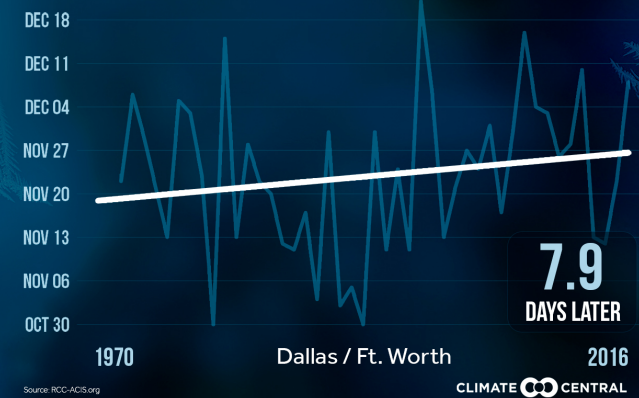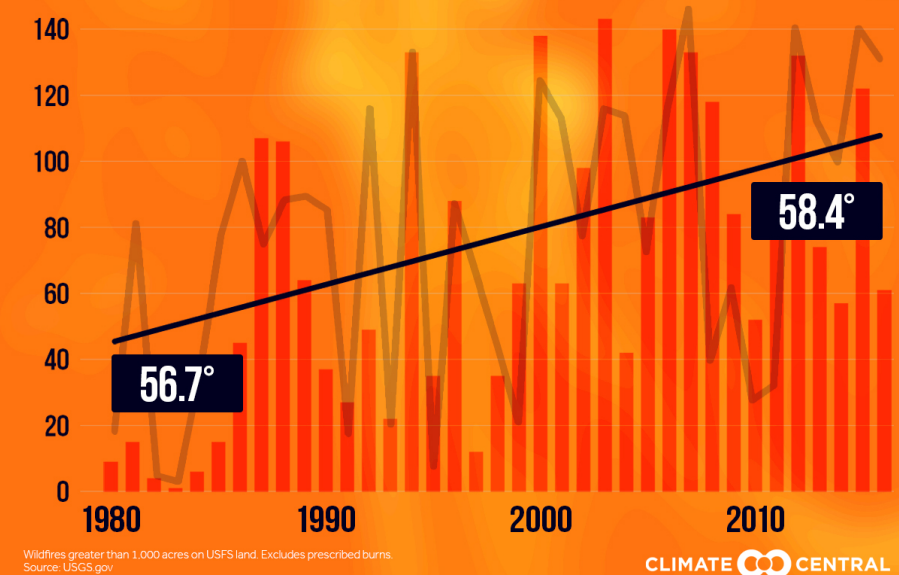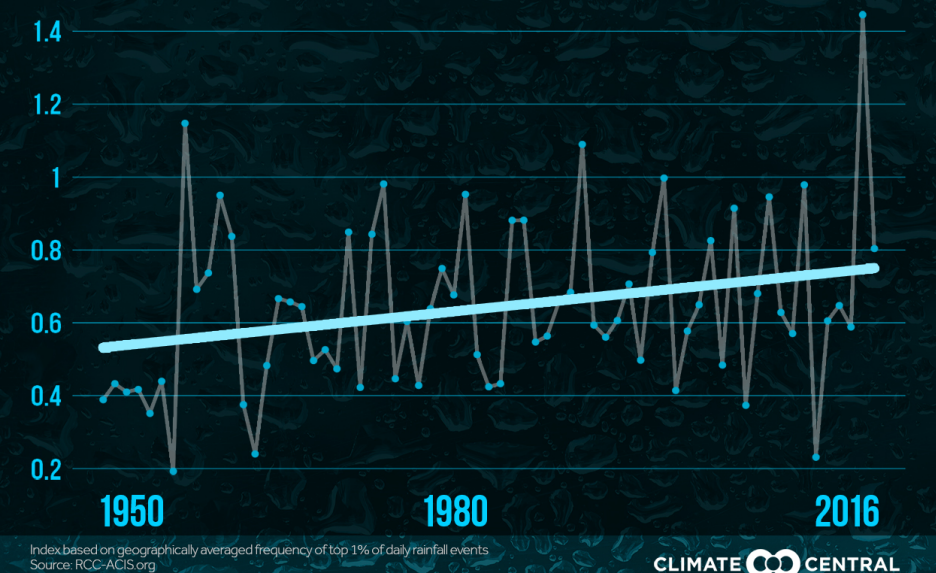
How do we make Climate Matters…

Easy? We've removed many of the barriers that inhibit local climate reporting; we provide localized data & graphics; we teach weathercasters how to report on climate; we show role models.

Fun? We raise the visibility of weathercasters who report on climate in news media & social media; we nominate them for prestigious awards; we give them shout outs; we help them network.

Popular? We publicize weathercasters who report on climate change; we work closely with opinion-leading leading weathercasters; as the number of participating weathercasters has grown, we let everyone in the weathercaster community know.
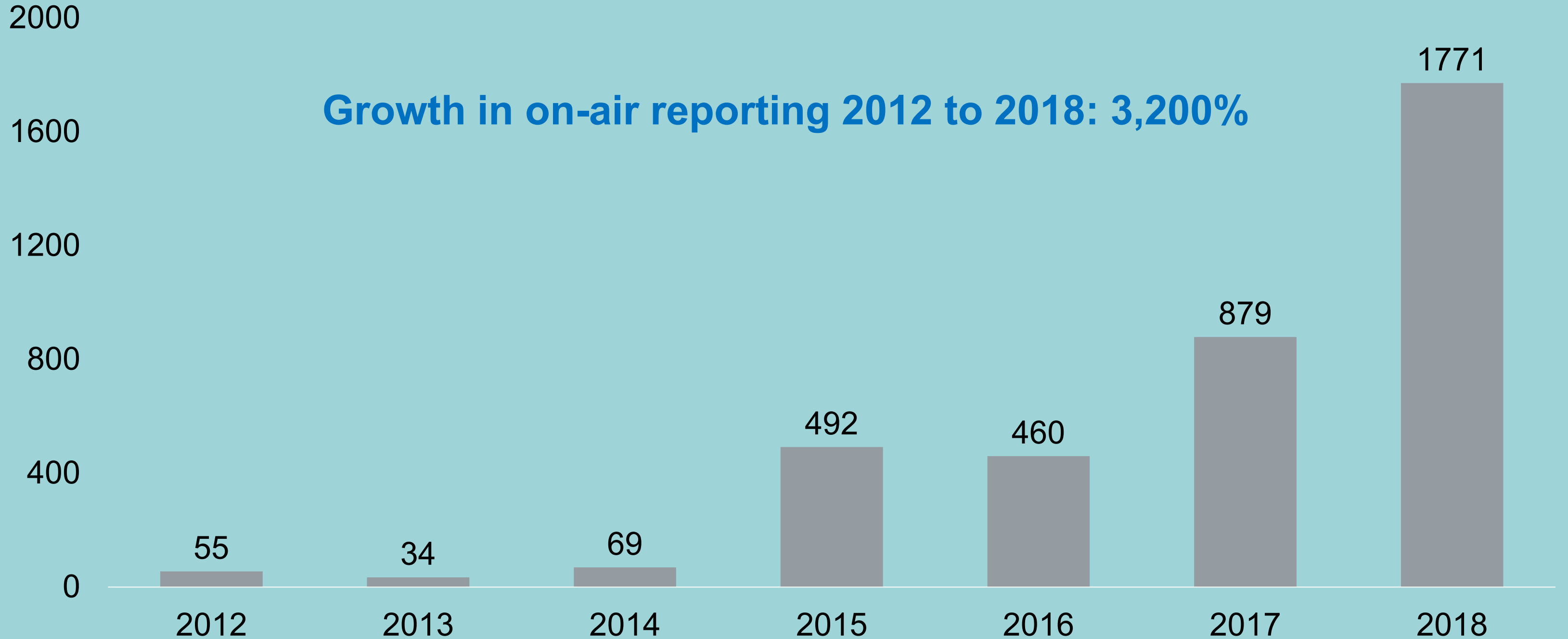
Remember and use these guiding heuristics

To spread important ideas:

Simple clear messages, repeated often, by a variety of trusted voices

To change people's behavior:

Make the behavior easy, fun & popular