


Contextualizing discourses of climate delay: a response to Lamb et al. (2020)

Géraldine Pflieger and Kari De Pryck 

Institute for Environmental Sciences, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Commentary

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Corresponding author:

Kari De Pryck;

Email: kari.depryck@unige.ch**Non-technical summary**

Individuals and institutions seeking to delay climate action use a variety of new discursive strategies, emphasizing the downsides, spreading fatalism, or betting on technological fixes. This commentary highlights the importance of context when investigating discourses of climate delay. Depending on who holds them and why, some discourses can take on different meanings, hinder or enhance climate action.

Technical summary

In this commentary, we propose a review of ‘Discourses of climate delay’ by Lamb et al. (2020). While we agree that discursive strategies of climate delay are taking new forms, we argue that such analysis should go beyond discourses and investigate the context in which they are enunciated to avoid oversimplifying the complexity of the debate about climate (in)action. Discourses, and the context in which they are enacted, hold an important place in climate deliberations and should be carefully analyzed from a multicultural perspective, open to social diversity.

Social media summary

Are all discourses of climate delay discourses of delay? Context matters when debating whether a discourse promotes (in)action.

‘Discourses of climate delay’ by Lamb et al. (2020) is *Global Sustainability*’s most read article in 2023 and has been widely shared on social media. It proposes a typology showing that discursive strategies downplaying climate action have become increasingly diverse and sophisticated. According to the authors, discourses that raise doubts about the reality and severity of climate change are now supplemented by discourses that question what action should be taken, at what cost, and by whom. While we agree that discursive strategies to climate delay are taking new forms, we argue that the analysis should not stop at discourses. In our view, the article falsely gives the impression that the contexts in which they are enunciated do not matter, thus risking oversimplifying the complexity of the debate about climate (in)action.

First of all, a discourse-oriented approach is problematic if not complemented by a thorough analysis of the actors and coalitions supporting them (Hajer, 1995; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). For example, two similar statements focusing on technological change have a totally different meaning if they are pronounced by an oil-producing country that sees technologies as an excuse to pursue fossil-fuel investments or by a nation carrying a vast decarbonization project. The sense of discourses thus depends on who formulate them and to whom they are addressed. The authors’ typology risks flattening extremely diverse positions and disregarding the different meanings that actors give to climate (in)action.

Second, it is important to examine actors’ intents. In the article, the authors consider, for example, that a discourse appealing to social justice (e.g., highlighting the impact of climate action on vulnerable communities) can be a strategy to delay action. Rather than generically appealing to motive, however, such argument needs to be supported by robust empirical investigations of the interests of the actors behind such statements, and the meta-discourses, or ideologies, underpinning them (Dryzek, 1997; Hulme, 2021). While statements emphasizing social justice may be intended to delay action, it can also be meant to set the conditions for ambitious climate action – as acknowledged for instance by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its Sixth Assessment Report.

Above all, one should be wary of the implications of unifying a series of complex positions around a single central concept, that of climate delay (as in Figure 1 in the original article). By creating a catch-all definition of climate delay, the article overstretchers the notion, blurring the distinctions between very different positions. This comes with the risk of limiting the range of appropriate arguments in the climate debate. Any critical analysis of ongoing climate policies, which would highlight the need for social justice,

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innovation, and technology transfer, could be categorized as climate delay and dismissed as such. Such analyses can have very different meanings if they are voiced by actors from the Global North or the Global South, from privileged or marginalized communities. The fact that many of the examples given in the article come from the Global North, and from right-leaning politicians and vested interests, calls into question the argument that 'climate delay discourses repeatedly occur across sources, actors and contexts' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 2).

In the context of the Global Stocktake of the Paris Agreement, which will come to an end in December 2023 at COP28, it is urgent to analyze climate discourses *in their full context*, drawing on interdisciplinary approaches and to avoid producing categories that would lead to appeal to motive and oversimplified classifications (Schipper et al., 2021). Discourses, or speech acts, hold an important place in climate deliberations and should be carefully analyzed from a multicultural perspective, open to social diversity.

Author contributions. The authors have equally contributed to this commentary.

Competing interest. None.

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