YOU'VE **SEEN**, OR **HEARD** ABOUT, THE MOVIE *DON'T LOOK UP.* NOW MEET OUR REGION'S REAL-LIFE SUPERSTAR CLIMATE WARRIOR: **EDWARD MAIBACH.**

By Kelly Kendall

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COURTESY OF MAIBACH

Edward Maibach has dedicated his life to constantly delivering urgently bad news. As in, the-Earth-will-perish-if-we-don't-change-our-ways-as-a-society kind of news.

Unfortunately for Maibach, 63, modern-day America hasn't totally evolved beyond ancient Greece when it comes to killing the messenger. He's gotten enough implied death threats from people who disagree with him that he doesn't like to reveal where he lives. And the exact location of the institute he founded at George Mason University's Fairfax campus, the Center for Climate Change Communication, is also generally kept mum.

But nasty online comments, emails, and the occasional vitriolic voicemail are all in a day's work for the man who is arguably the world's leading climate communications scientist. Maibach is not trained as a climate change expert himself—instead, he studies their work and then figures out the best way to translate it to the public. He's a Stanford-educated social scientist with an academic background in public health. "And in my view," he says, "climate change is the most important public health challenge that human civilization faces."

Maibach's efforts landed him in the No. 7 spot on the first-ever Reuters Hot List last year, a ranking of the 1,000 "top climate scientists" in the world. It's a roster of the most influential names in the field, ranked partly by the number of academic papers they write and partly by how often those papers get mentioned in the press, social media, policy papers, and other outlets.

So plenty of people are listening to Edward Maibach. And yet, despite the widespread consensus among scientists that climate change is mainly caused by humans—it's at 99.9 percent by now, according to a survey of climate studies published in October—many Americans' attitudes toward the topic can be disheartening. "We invented climate denial here, and we export it to many other countries," says Maibach. "By 'climate denial,' I mean people who deny the realities of human-caused climate change or deny that it is causing serious problems. Climate denial isn't a thing in most of the world."

For example, 93 percent of Europeans consider climate change a "serious problem," according to a July study by the European Commission, and that number has been rising steadily in recent years. That's compared to 67 percent of Americans, a figure that has remained fairly static, in a November *Washington Post*–ABC News poll.

Maibach with a high school-aged docent at The Climate Museum in NYC where he serves on their Advisory Board

COURTESY OF MAIBACH

Does Maibach ever feel like Cassandra, the tragic figure of Greek myth who was cursed to see the future yet never have her prophecies believed? He bursts out laughing. "Poor Cassandra! Yeah, she was so tortured. No, I would never want to be a Cassandra type."

So he refuses to be one.

"Gina McCarthy has an expression," says Maibach of the woman who led the Environmental Protection Agency under President Obama and now serves as the first-ever national climate adviser under President Biden. "She says, 'No one follows a mope.'" So while Maibach really is a genuinely upbeat person, he says, he also maintains his enthusiasm for what he does because, well, he's more effective that way. "Let's call it a genuine reflection of who I am, as well as the strategic decision about who I need to be to avoid directly banging my head against the wall."

Maibach has accomplished far more than that, says Maurice Tamman, the reporter and editor who

compiled the Reuters Hot List. "Ed is a sophisticated, modern communicator—he's using social media, and his papers are quoted routinely in the press," says Tamman. "Climate change is a politically fraught area—how those stories are communicated is a field of research in and of itself. Ed for several years now has led that field."

Growing up in Northern California's Marin County, Maibach "knew" he would become a doctor someday. But the hypercompetitive pre-med students he encountered at the University of California–San Diego turned him off from that idea, and he ended up majoring in psychology, which taught him to be interested in how people think and why they do what they do—training that would come in handy throughout his career. "Fortunately, public health found me, and that, really, was clearly my path," he says. "Instead of taking care of one patient at a time, our patients are a population. So we tend to try to think and work at the big-picture level. And that's sort of a natural expression of who I am and how I think."

While Maibach had enjoyed an environmental science class he'd taken in high school, his passion was always less about the chemistry of the Earth's core and more about human health. After getting his master's in public health at San Diego State University and then a doctorate in communication at Stanford University, he joined the global public-relations powerhouse Porter Novelli as its director of social marketing, working on campaigns against smoking, to promote vaccine safety, and highlighting other public health issues. In 2003, he went to the National Cancer Institute for a few years before taking a job in the School of Public Health at George Washington University.

It was in 2006 that he had one of those life-altering experiences you don't see coming. On vacation with friends and family in the Italian Alps, they signed up at the last minute for a series of morning lectures from the world's leading climate scientists. Afternoons were for whatever you wanted to do, which for Maibach meant going on hikes with one of the scientists for even more lecturing. "I listened to him break it down," he says, "and by the end of the week, I had the one and only epiphany that I've ever had, which was, I finally understood that climate change isn't only about plants, penguins, and polar bears—it's a threat to people's health and well-being in a very profound sense. And as somebody who had worked on the world's biggest public health challenges, I came to feel like,

"I don't fault anyone who has reached the wrong understanding of climate change, because they're victims of a really profound, sustained misinformation campaign."

This is it. This is the biggest challenge we face. I knew right then and there I would spend the rest of my life working on this."

So Maibach joined GMU to create the Center for Climate Change Communication, which he describes as a "think-and-do tank." "We do research to illuminate public understanding of this issue," he says. "How does the public think about it? How do they feel about it? What, if anything, are they doing about it, and what, if anything, would they like to see our elected officials do about it?"

That's the "think" part. Then, once Maibach and his colleagues have insights into public understanding that seem actionable, they test out communication programs to see whether they help the public have a more "reality-based" understanding of climate change.

For instance, Maibach's team discovered early on, back in 2008, that TV weathercasters were among the public's most trusted sources of information on global warming. Besides the trust they'd earned, they had an unusual amount of access into people's homes, and by nature of their job, they tended to be good communicators. Joe Witte, a NASA specialist who was a weathercaster himself at the time, saw those results and suggested to Maibach that his profession might be a powerful one for communicating important climate change information. A pilot program, Climate Matters, tested this theory in one media market in South Carolina for one year.

"We learned, sure enough, that when a single weathercaster in a single media market makes the effort to teach his or her viewers about the local implications of global warming, it makes a big difference," says Maibach. Today, Climate Matters provides localized climate reports, graphics, and other materials every week to more than 1,050 weathercasters in 95 percent of America's media markets in the hopes they'll use them to educate viewers, whether it's to help explain a heavy rain or why poison ivy has become more of a problem over the decades. (Thank warmer weather and increased CO2 in the air.) "It helps people understand the relevance of climate change to us and to our family," says Maibach. "It's hard for people to wrap their heads around a global problem."

Bernadette Woods Placky has worked with Maibach for years in her role as chief meteorologist and Climate Matters director at Climate Central, a research-and-reporting institute. Ten years ago, only 54 percent of her fellow meteorologists were convinced the climate was changing, she recalls.

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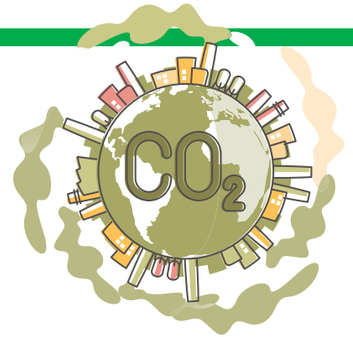

Mistakes We Make When We Talk About Climate Change

Edward Maibach is literally a pro at discussing this topic. Here are the missteps he sees the most.

MAKING PEOPLE FEEL GUILTY. "I think the most important error that we make is to make people feel as if somehow this is their fault, when most people did nothing to create the reality of the lives we are living today," says Maibach. "What we need to do is point our finger at the real problem." That, he argues, is a fossil fuel industry that's working as feverishly as it can to keep a monopoly on energy supplies. While fossil fuels were our best option 50 years ago, he says, that is not the case today. Clean energy is our best option by far.

Still, that's not to say we should let ourselves off the hook too easily. "Everyone can play a role in creating a better future," says Maibach. It comes down to how you run your household, how you get around town (and the country), and how you vote—hopefully, by electing public officials "who acknowledge that we have a problem, a serious problem, and who will take the kind of actions that will help solve that problem," says Maibach.

PATTING OURSELVES ON THE BACK TOO HARD FOR RECYCLING. "We are, as a society, almost obsessed with recycling, and recycling is an interesting idea that hardly works in practice," says Maibach. "So much of what we recycle doesn't actually end up being recycled. It ends up in landfills." The fossil fuel industry has been eager to promote the idea of recycling because it gives them license to continue generating harmful plastics, he says. "While it is true that there are societal benefits to recycling glass and metals, plastic recycling is largely a fiction, and yet that's often the first thing that we think about when we decide we really need to do better in terms of our own personal action. We're often paying too much attention to the behaviors that only help at the margin, and we're ignoring the behaviors that are most important." Instead, Maibach urges people to demand serious climate leadership from elected officials and the companies whose products we buy.

NOT TALKING ABOUT IT AT ALL. "There's a climate silence in America," says Maibach, even though most data shows that more Americans are concerned about climate change than ever before. People are uncertain of discussing a topic they don't know a lot about, he says; they wonder if their views put them in the minority; they fear starting an argument. "You feel like, *Well, why isn't anyone talking about it?*" says Maibach. "And in fact, a lot of people feel that way."

ARGUING WITH PEOPLE WHO WILL NEVER CHANGE THEIR MINDS. Even Maibach concedes that some will simply never come around to the idea of climate change. "In our center, we don't really spend time dealing with people who have deeply entrenched views that are scientifically wrong," he says. "We focus on the majority of Americans who simply don't understand the issue very well, but they'd like to understand it better."

"There was a lot of work needed in the earlier days in building those relationships," says Placky. Today, the number is 95 percent, and while the Climate Matters program has been a collaboration across several schools and institutions, Placky credits Maibach with much of its success.

"He thinks strategically, he thinks big, and he listens," says Placky. "And he has a very easygoing style. He can have a conversation with anyone, at any level, and I can see how he navigates and works through it and can move something forward at the end. It's really impressive to watch."

According to a poll taken in November 2021 by *The Washington Post* and ABC News, 67 percent of American adults say global warming, or climate change, is a "serious problem."

That's about the same share as seven years ago—despite the fact, the *Post* pointed out, that climate scientists are ringing alarm bells more loudly than ever.

And a deep partisan divide is growing. The percentage of Democrats who see climate change as a major threat rose 11 points to 95 percent, while the percentage of Republicans with that view dropped 10 points to 39 percent, according to the *Post*–ABC News survey. That tracks with annual Gallup polls that show Republican concern dropping after 2017, when President Donald Trump took office. Trump stoked skepticism of the existence of climate change and pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement, the global accord to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that cause the atmosphere to warm. In 2017, 41 percent of Republicans told Gallup pollsters they believed global warming had already begun, but last year, only 29 percent felt that way.

Unfortunately, some people don't simply disagree with Maibach's message—they get angry. "You should blow out your brains so we don't have to" is the type of comment he's seen on online message boards beneath stories that quote him, and in emails waiting in his inbox. While he's quick to stress that he considers these threats merely "implied," he takes them seriously enough to avoid publicizing the exact whereabouts of his Fairfax office or even his current hometown somewhere in suburban Maryland.

Maibach, however, gets that viewing climate change as a global problem can be hard for many people in an increasingly polarized country. "I don't fault anyone who has reached the wrong understanding of climate change, because they're victims of a really profound, sustained misinformation campaign," he says. "People don't naturally come to reject scientifically verified facts—people don't come to do that on their own—they have to be deceived."

"We're right up there with Maryland and California and a couple of other states now as really recognizing the nature of the challenges of climate change and starting to take the actions that are necessary for us to really do our part and enjoy all of the benefits."

Even Maibach has fallen prey, he says. While working at Porter Novelli on public health campaigns, he had colleagues who labored on behalf of the fossil fuel industry. "I know how effective their work was, because I still find the ideas that their marketing planted in my brain 20-some years later," he says. "And it's hard work for us to recognize beliefs that we hold are not true."

But he's heartened that most of us are paying attention to the data.

"We are blessed to live in a community that has so many assets, both natural and human," says Maibach. "We went from a state that was sort of in, you know, the back of the pack, to being a state that has leapfrogged way up to the front of the pack. We're right up there with Maryland and California and a couple of other states now as really recognizing the nature of the challenges of climate change and starting to take the actions that are necessary for us to really do our part and enjoy all of the benefits."

If Maibach sounds unduly optimistic, well, that's good for the cause.

"This notion of doom is definitely gaining traction, including among some people in the field, but it's really unhelpful," he says. "And I'll tell you why: because research shows the more hopeful you are, the more likely you are to actually be taking action."