



## Interview with Kate McKenney (Digital Climate Coalition)

Ashley Hopkinson

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you start by introducing yourself and describe for me what is the problem that your organization set out to solve, and how you are working towards solving that?**

**Kate McKenney:** Hi, I am Kate McKenney. I'm the Interim Executive Director of the Digital Climate Coalition (DCC) The DCC was started to help solve the problem of digital capacity within climate organizations. It started as a coalition of national climate communications organizations, the Yale Program from Climate Communications, The Years Project, the Climate Advocacy Lab, Climate Nexus, Resource Media, and some others. Basically it came together kind of to solve this problem around the rapid rate of digital innovation. We needed to come together and get coordinated as a climate communications movement to try to keep pace with that.

One of the big goals of that also was something that I think the climate movement is always struggling with: How can you reach new constituencies? How to engage with constituencies, and particularly with an emphasis on how you engage with frontline folks that are living in the direct impact of climate impact and also with communities of color. The idea was really about "how do we bring this sort of world of digital innovation together with building capacity and support for frontline and BIPOC communities through the lens of climate change?" So the DCC started first by being a place where those groups have come together to coordinate their support. And then there's been some shifts over time to how we best do that work.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Who would you say is benefiting from your work and how do they benefit? Would you say it's the climate organizations that people are trying to build this capacity?**

**Kate McKenney:** Both. One of the big shifts that happened when this work started, was that we were definitely working through a framework of campaigns. The Digital Climate Coalition was the place where things like the Stop Line 3 movement was happening, and that was where a lot of the coordination was happening. There's been a few other campaigns like that, which have been focused on a Gulf without LNG, which is focused on the Gulf, and is a campaign that Climate



Nexus has been running. Then a couple other campaigns in Texas like Por Texas, Para Todos, which is really focused on infrastructure. What became clear through that work was it wasn't enough to coordinate the national groups. You needed to pair that with the capacity building and support for the communities and groups that were coming into those movements.

Stop Line 3 was indigenous led. There were a lot of community-based organizations. The Gulf is a really diverse coalition of folks that are working across the Gulf region. In Texas, the Por Texas, Para Todos campaign is working with folks that are doing immigrant work right on the border, and also folks that are doing more environmental justice work in larger cities. What we were finding was it really wasn't enough to come in with a campaign. You needed to pair that with infrastructure and support for the organizations. So we were doing this work of developing content and websites and advertising campaigns that were obviously educating and inspiring people to take action. But we also weren't going to be there forever. We wanted to bring that capacity to the groups on the ground, so that they could benefit in the long run around the impact of the campaign.

The DCC changed its focus to do two or three things. The first was to do digital trainings for folks. We did it for the national groups because a lot of them are coming from a communications and marketing background and didn't have as much experience in digital organizing. We launched a bunch of trainings to support building that digital muscle for those organizations. And we also offer those trainings to the frontline and community-based organizations. We were able to do direct training of those folks that they could then take advantage of the mobile numbers or the emails or the people that were coming into their campaigns. We also did assessments of those community-based organizations so we could help them understand what tools they needed, what staffing they needed, what kind of other support that they needed to get up and running on benefiting from that work. And then from that, a lot of groups of the smaller community-based organizations were like, "This is awesome. We don't have time right now."

I can talk a little bit about that tension. We found that there were a couple groups that were like, "yes, we need this, we're ready." What we would then do is pair one-on-one training and coaching, and then some pass through funding to those organizations to build capacity. For example, a group in Texas called Arise Adelante, we helped them develop an organizing software. We got them access to tools to develop their ability to use WhatsApp for community organizing and those sorts of things. They were able to take the benefit of that larger campaign and really bring it into their program.

We've just been learning this whole time. Now what we're doing is we've kind of flipped the script a little bit. We're still working within national groups, but we start from the place of working directly with the frontline coalitions and networks themselves, because what we found is we



needed a bit more infrastructure to scale support. One of the things that we're doing now is working directly with the coalitions that already exist to frontline organizations, and then we bring in the national climate folks to support, rather than starting from the frame of the national organizations.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say makes the organization's approach distinctive?**

**Kate McKenney:** I've been in this space of digital and data for a long time. Before I came to the DCC, I worked at the giant national group, Natural Resources Defense Council. I think one of the things that's come to light through all of this, is that a lot of the resources and infrastructure are really centralized in the groups that have the capacity to manage it. With that comes issues around representation and who the constituencies of those organizations are. DCC's fundamental belief is that unless you resource the organizations that have the constituencies that they're activating and are more representative, you're not going to actually get a representative climate movement. I think our emphasis is unique in the way that we've flipped the script a little bit, and we're working as hard as we can to bring those capacities directly to the places where the infrastructure is needed most.

I think the way that benefits the broader movement is that we've been limited in this sort of like, we do a lot of work in analyzing who's on your list. We do voter file matches, we do analysis. And the same narrative keeps coming up. I think across the progressive movement, it tends to be white, it tends to be older. Those are the folks that are actively engaged in the work. And I think that's a communications and narrative issue, but it's also a capacity and infrastructure issue, because I think literally there isn't the data and pipes that are in the places where the organizing is happening. It's not that frontline communities aren't organizing, they're actually doing a ton of it and doing it really effectively. It's just that they don't have the same access to infrastructure and technology and tools that they need.

We're trying to build it, so it's durable too because there'll be a story about an organization because something horrible happens, or there's a moment in time, but we are trying to make it so that there's a larger infrastructure to keep building and supporting growth over time. I think this is important because it's been a shift for us too. We're small, so one of the issues has always been scale, because it's deep work working with these organizations. The other thing that we've shifted is that we're doing a pilot program right now with a group called New York Renews, which is a coalition of 300 or 400 groups across New York working on transition work. And we're working through the lens of that coalition because we're building capacity for the digital staff on the coalition themselves, while also working with a cohort of groups within that coalition to build their digital capacity. The idea is that we want to figure out how to scale support. If we work within the



coalition, there'll be more of an infrastructure that can sustain itself through time. That's also been a new frame for us around how, and so we're exploring some other places to do that work.

**Ashley Hopkinson: One of the things that you mentioned early on is how things are shifting and changing. And I know you've been in the work for a while, so I wonder what insights or teachable lessons can be taken that others can use? What advice would you give to someone that's wanting to replicate climate and technology organization or justice work and technology?**

**Kate McKenney:** I think we're living in a crazy time. We sometimes separate out community organizing from the world of technology and AI, and all the things that are happening in our world that are both exciting and also terrifying. One of the reasons I came into this work is that I'm a data person, and we're living in a world where data is really driving the future in both an inspiring and a scary way. We're living in a place where AI and data models are like Twitter or X, and Facebook, all of those algorithms and models are being built off of what I believe are faulty data sets that aren't representative. They're biased. And it's a little bit about who has the infrastructure, and who has the support and the content. And then you live in the world of disinformation.

So we're putting a lot of emphasis on technology without resourcing it in the right ways, in the right places. I think we're living in a time where it's harder to reach people on platforms because the models and the algorithms work against us, and they're all based on how much money you can make. I've seen a lot of organizations like, "it costs a lot more money to acquire and reach certain audiences and people of color." So a lot of money and emphasis is being put on where your return on investment is. And I think that's really dangerous. I think there's a real need in our movement, particularly with climate change and all the social justice issues that we're facing right now, to put the emphasis on really making sure that we're building infrastructure and support for the communities that are going to be impacted the most. I think if we rely on technology to fix it without fixing the root problems, we'll be in trouble.

The other thing is, particularly in the communications and narrative space, we're working with some amazing folks that do narrative and survey research in this space. And a lot of groups that we talk to also are like, "what do we do with this? How do we action it? How do we take this information and use it in our work?" I think there's a big gap there around how you do this work and how you take the narratives that we know are working, and then support folks using it in their campaigning. What we're doing now is working to support building out some infrastructure around message testing and things like that, that really shine a light on ways that you can use our narrative guidelines to really ground it in communities and people.



We just ran a really interesting survey that was looking at communities of color and how they approach climate change from an emotional standpoint. And there's a lot of faith and religion coming into the work, which is something that the climate movement hasn't explored a lot of, but I think is really important at a community level when you're talking about how communities come together. There's a lot of dissatisfaction with the government and our ability to make change. So these are some things that we need to explore, and how we bring together that narrative. And then I think the role of the DCC is, how do we collect that information and share it back? That's where the technology and the infrastructure comes back, and we can kind of be that conduit between the community groups and the broader movement.

**Ashley Hopkinson: You had mentioned earlier a shift to choose to focus on more frontline coalition and community-based organizations. And I wonder if you can share why DCC decided on that strategy and not another? What was the insight or the lesson that led you all to making that decision, shifting in that way?**

**Kate McKenney:** Well, there were two things. We were focusing at the national level. So the first shift was that, "oh no, we need to get closer to the frontline and community-based organizations that we're working with." And then we ran into a scale problem because of the tensions between how much money and capacity we have as an organization to support groups. This work is intensive. We've been working with this group, Arise, for a year in supporting them, and you have to. You have to get embedded in their work. And we're like, "well, how do we actually scale this, and how does it become long-term?"

One of our board members is Sarah Shanley Hope from the Solutions Project, and with the Climate Advocacy Lab as well, we've been thinking through models for how to build sustainable support. It was through our partnerships with the Solutions Project and the Climate Advocacy Lab where we started thinking, "oh, wait, there are coalitions that exist that are bringing people together in a long-term capacity." And the hypothesis was, "if we can work through that structure rather than through a campaign that's time bound, what will happen is that we'll be able to build support at the coalition level, while at the same time build that more individualized support."

For example, with New York Renews, I've been working directly with their communications and digital staff to help and support them in their work. But we're also doing a cohort of six groups that want more capacity. So this week we're doing an email 101 and ads training, a social media training, but it's all grounded in the goals of the coalition overall. How are these disparate groups of people going to be working together?

The other thing is we've just started talking with Climate Advocacy Lab because they've done a bunch of work around multi-race, cross-class coalition work. That's another frame that we're



looking at around how we take a lot of the work around coalition development and org support, and then come in and figure out what capacities we can bring on the digital and data and research side of things to help support the coalitions as well. Coalitions are interesting too, because just in New York, they've got progressive groups, they have labor groups, they have faith-based groups, they have lots of different constituencies. And in order to be successful, you have to be able to talk to all those different constituencies. So we're helping do that.

**Ashley Hopkinson: In this space of doing deep work, how do you measure success at DCC? What is the evidence that you're making progress toward these goals that you've set?**

**Kate McKenney:** I think a couple things are driving us. I'm a data and metrics person, and so I think at the root level, we're trying to get to a place where we've kind of set up a structure where we're like, "okay, we have X number of partners that we're supporting directly over the course of the year." So that's the framework that we're working under from a perspective of how many people we are actually impacting and supporting. We also do a lot of re-granting where we pass money through to those organizations. We also track how much money is going to those organizations in addition to the capacity and training that we're looking at. And then I think, what is that? There's that big hairy audacious goals. You're supposed to have those too. The stretch goals.

I think the dream goal, and it's been harder than I thought it was going to be, is about having representative data of the truly diverse constituencies that are part of the climate movement that aren't necessarily represented. So our hope is to also onboard. One of our core offerings is data capacities. We have a partnership with the movement cooperative, and we have a data warehouse. We can bring analytics support to those organizations. And we want to create a dataset that can help reflect back around that full cycle of what is engagement, how are we moving people? And it feels less audacious and scary or stretchy, but the goal is that we have more people onboarded onto that platform so that we can reflect back, "is this working?"

A lot of groups are relying on advertising metrics, which are really not great. You don't know who you're targeting, you don't know if you were effective, you don't know if you reach people that you do. And the only way to do it is to have the infrastructure and data. So really that's the end metric for us, getting that constituency and ability to track and reflect back what is working, what's not working, and moving through that.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I wonder if you can share a story of impact, something that illustrates the story of DCC?**

**Kate McKenney:** Arise Adelante. They're a group that's in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. They have this amazing model of civic engagement education for women and students. They work



primarily in the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley, which are a lot of immigrants. They're not recognized by the state of Texas. A lot of times they have no clean water, no infrastructure, no electricity. They're drinking bad water. There's no sanitary services.

We were introduced to them through our work with Resource Media through their campaign called Por Texas, Para Todos, which was an infrastructure campaign. When we met with Arise, we weren't really sure where we were going to start with them, but in talking to them, it became clear that they have an amazing organizing infrastructure already in place where they have staff and volunteers that are working across Southern Texas. And they're running these amazing programs like education. They're getting people to show up at town and city and state advocacy meetings. They're having parties, they're eating food, and they're all doing this amazing way. They're motivating and bringing people into civic engagement through the matriarchy, which I also love.

So when we started working with them, we weren't quite sure where we were going to begin. I think I started with, "Okay, Resource Media is running this campaign where they're trying to acquire activists and they're collecting email addresses." But then when we met with them, I was like, "Oh no, you all are doing organizing." They're going to the community to communicate. They're knocking on doors and they're doing this work. And they were working off of a database that was built in 1982. They had younger organizers who were like, "Hey, we're sick of the pads and paper that we're using to collect the information. We're spending hours doing data entry." So what we ended up doing was deciding to work with them on implementing a tool called Action Builder, which is an organizing database that Action Network built. I thought we were going to give them Action Network, but in the end we ended up giving them Action Builder, which is more of an organizing tool.

We gave them a grant and they're about to launch the new tool in the next couple of weeks. But then, through the conversations, it also became clear that, in all of their organizing, they don't have any email addresses. So even a campaign that was collecting email addresses wasn't beneficial to them, because most of the folks in their constituencies don't have email. They might not have access to the internet. So we also have started to work with them on things like, "well, how do folks want to be communicated with?" And it ends up being WhatsApp. With the Action Builder integration, we're exploring how to develop ways for them to move people into WhatsApp and communities and groups. That can be the way that in addition to their place-based organizing, they can do that organizing.

I was talking to them about the colonias and was doing some research. I found on the attorney general of the state of Texas's website that they actually had boundaries for the colonias. And that was something that they'd been struggling with too because they're using voter file data, which doesn't necessarily, one, represent their community, and two, doesn't have the boundaries



with which they're working within. So I ended up writing to the attorney general of Texas. I didn't think I was going to get anywhere with it. I was like, "Can I have access to these files?" And they wrote me back and said, "We'll send you a diskette." And I thought they were going to send me a floppy disc. I was like, this is classic. But they ended up sending a CD-ROM of it. So we were able then to upload those into the voter file. They're able to then see where people live and what colonias based on those files, which was something that they weren't able to do in the past.

One of the things to learn is how do you make people less dependent on you? So we've also been able to make them an affiliate of The Movement Cooperative. That's something that they wouldn't be able to have the capacity or the financials to support on their own. But through our membership to The Movement Cooperative, they're able to tack onto us and they're able to access trainings, lower costs, and access digital tools. We're staying engaged with them on the campaign level. We're also working with a few other groups in Texas that are providing support around just generalized organizing.

The other thing that was super interesting about working with Arise, was a narrative thing. **I think we assume that people that work in the environmental justice and climate justice space are more progressive. And the reality is this is a more moderate community that doesn't necessarily ideologically agree with everything that the progressive movement is saying. Religion plays a huge part there too. It really has started opening our eyes to how you can support multiple narratives in communities, and the way they approach this work.** Those are things that are continuing now as some research to help groups on the ground in Texas kind of think about that and how you support different types of communities. Arise has been an amazing experience. We've been really lucky to learn with them and support them through a lot of changes.

**Ashley Hopkinson: This is a little bit of a switch, but can you describe something that you tried that didn't work or didn't meet your expectations, and what lesson that taught you?**

**Kate McKenney:** The DCC is a startup, so there's been many, we call it the Phoenix. You go up, you burn, you come back down. I think some of the biggest lessons have been really about the idea that you think you know what people need, and you enter into a conversation around the work like, "Hey, this is what I can offer you." And they're like, "Nah, that's great, but I don't need that." That has been the biggest learning, and there's been many stories of that. There was a group that we were working with in the Pacific Northwest around the pipeline work, and they did organizing with Latinx folks that worked in there and in the vicinity of the pipelines, and were doing work. They had a digital staffer who was like, "I really want to bring the DCC in to help us build out our growth on social media." When we met with the executive director, he was like, "Nope, that's not what we need." And he wasn't wrong necessarily, and we weren't wrong either. It's just that relationship building and trust building is a really long process.





I think some of the early days of the DCC were very focused on, “we'll train you on this thing, we'll help you get your disclaimers up, and then bam, you'll be able to run ads.” But there's a lot of work in between. “Do you really need to run ads? Do you have the staff to run ads? Is it better just to call somebody on the phone rather than investing in ads?” There's just a lot of questions around things.

A personal learning for me has been, I come at things from the importance of data and the importance of measuring, and I think we've found some resistance around that frame, and that's great. Maybe down the line we want that, but what I really need is can you just fix this problem that I'm having right now? So I think that's been a huge tension because I think we really want to be open and supportive of where people are, but at the same time, having that understanding and foresight that, “but this is where we need to be.” The starting places can be really different. That's just been a huge lesson for us.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Putting the issue of funding aside, are there any challenges that you're currently facing that you haven't yet been able to overcome or solve?**

**Kate McKenney:** I think scale is definitely a challenge. Something that's been ever present is like how do you scale support for organizations? A lot of times there's a lot of white papers, and we have those releases of the things, and I think scaling implementation of the findings is a challenge. We come out with these amazing insights and resources and things like that for folks, but the work and internal capacities that it takes to operationalize them are long.

I also think we're facing a real crisis around folks. We know that people are really aware of climate change. They know it's happening, but it's becoming harder and harder for people to see solutions. I think there is the type of movement that we need to keep up with the climate impacts that are happening. How do we as a movement scale and support and focus to bring people together? It feels like we're in that moment.

And I know I shouldn't necessarily talk about funding, but the type of funding that organizations are getting can affect things. A lot of times it's tied to a specific program or compared to a campaign or specific project. I know it's challenging to give general operating support to organizations, but I think that is a tension that we're feeling particularly in this space where you have organizations that need that flexibility to hire staff and bring infrastructure through technology into their organizations. Those sorts of things, I think, are also a challenge that we see. Lastly, we all live in these cycles of campaigns and electoral cycles and all of that. There's just a general exhaustion around how we're going to keep and sustain the type of movements. And that's fundraising, that's the general capacity of organizations and just emotional wellbeing folks.



**Ashley Hopkinson: How is DCC working towards systems level change in the field of climate and technology? Is it from the technology space leveraging these platforms and innovations? Do you feel like it's partnerships or a combination of approaches that you guys are using to work towards changing things at a larger scale?**

**Kate McKenney:** I think it's a combination of those things. I think about it from the perspective of “we need a truly representational movement in order to affect the change that we need.” We know that there's a need to bring the stories and the impact of frontline communities, and particularly people of color that are doing this work, into the narrative, and to also shine a light onto the successes of those things.

I sometimes think that we live in a space of confirmation bias in the climate movement. Sometimes it's like we have these narratives and things, and you bring in the advertising that kind of feeds that confirmation bias. The reality is that we need to bring more voices, more data, more information into that. We're able to test our assumptions around things. I think the systems work is doing that partnership and development of those groups so that that information, that data, those engagement strategies are all part of that broader narrative and movement. For us, technology is becoming harder because of capitalism and the way digital platforms work, but the only way that we can combat that is to bring resources and shine a light on the things that are not as resourced.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I wonder what is needed from other actors in the climate space to help systems change as well. What would you say you guys need other people to basically bring?**

**Kate McKenney:** I think it's resourcing, funding and support. We have been lucky to work in the coalition of folks that are really focused on equity and justice and all of those things. And I think we just need more of it, more infrastructure, more support, more people as part of that work. We need the people that are telling the stories that are amplifying the work of the folks. We need that to keep going. We need funding. A lot of these groups have money and advertising budgets that could be used to support the development of the other groups that would be beneficial to everybody. The other thing that we've been exploring is shared infrastructure. What are the ways that we're not reinventing the wheel? How are we building infrastructure that can be shared and support multiple organizations rather than having to have everybody fend for themselves? We're exploring ways around cooperative infrastructure sharing too, that can support everybody having access to the tools and platforms that they need.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I think that's powerful, because we were talking about capacity earlier, so that's really critical. The last question is, what's your vision for DCC in the next five years?**



**Kate McKenney:** I would like to see us be able to create this replicable model of engagement and scalability where we're truly bringing together the communications, the research, the digital, the technology, and the data capacities. We've kind of seen durable change in the groups that we're partnering with, where they're able to build off of their support. We're trying a lot to ground our work in the goals and address transition and all of that. So in five years, I would love to see us in a state, maybe like Louisiana or Texas where we have positive climate policy and we have a coalition of folks all working together to move that forward in a sustained way that's building off of narrative, research and digital technology support.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you for your time today, Kate.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*