**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Hello, everyone.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Hello and welcome to the 10th episode of Audio Distancing, the Broad Science minisode series about communicating inclusive science in the time of COVID19.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

I'm Rackeb Tesfaye.

**Alyssa Favreau**

And I'm Alyssa Favreau.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Alyssa. Rapid fire game for you. You ready?

**Alyssa Favreau**

Yeah, I'm ready.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

What big names immediately come to mind when talking about the climate change movement?

**Alyssa Favreau**

OK. Greta Thunberg. Al Gore. David Suzuki, I guess for some CanCon?

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

I like that. Should we like throw in Jeff Bezos or what? Is that like appropriate?

**Alyssa Favreau**

Or what. Oh, man, that guy. I have a few volcanoes I'd love to throw him into.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Very much is that guy. We don't endorse violence.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Well, officially.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Yeah, officially. Anyway, all I hear is mainly is [insert white person] who's advocating for the climate. And as per usual, black communities have been completely erased.

**Alyssa Favreau**

That's why we're excited to continue our focus on the intersection of climate change and coronavirus by talking to Jared DeWese, senior communications adviser for the climate and energy program at Washington-based think tank Third Way.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Their work is tackling this very gap of black inclusion in the climate change movement, and sharing their voices and perceptions about the environment.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Jared also recently wrote an op-ed for The Hill titled "Black People Are Dying from Coronavirus, Air Pollution is One of the Main Culprits."

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

In the piece he discusses recent research from Harvard that found that even a very small increase in exposure to a common air pollutant is associated with a 15 percent increase in the COVID19 death rate, and that increased risk is disproportionately affecting African Americans.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Here he is talking about why this happens. Let's take a listen.

**Jared DeWese**

First thank you, Alyssa and Rackeb, for having me on it. We love this podcast. So again, thank you. So part of the reason why is because of a history of redlining. And redlining in the United States was this practice, this systemic practice, where mortgages were denied to people, mostly people of colour in urban areas, preventing them from buying a home in a certain neighbourhood. So it was forced segregation in a way, and most of the neighbourhoods that they were forced to live in were neighbourhoods that were near petrochemical plants [and] already had dirtier air. They were near highways. They were just areas where white or wealthier families didn't want to live. And those were the only places that black people were allowed to live in urban areas like Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Atlanta. And we're seeing that those are the communities where coronavirus has a higher rate of infection and also death rate.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Pivoting to some of the work that you're doing within these Black communities. You and your team at Third Way recently conducted a qualitative study examining the perceptions that Black communities across the US have about the environment and the climate crisis. Before we get into your findings, can you talk about how this was conducted and why you thought a qualitative approach was needed? Because as you were citing, a lot of this tends to be quantitative research. Why was this qualitative approach really necessary?

**Jared DeWese**

So we initially intended for this research to be both qualitative and quantitative, and the qualitative results were going to inform the survey that we created, for the survey instrument for the quantitative research. We'd finished our qualitative research about the end of February, and we'd wrapped up and we were gearing up to go into the field with our qualitative research. And coronavirus hit. It actually was hitting while we were in qualitative, but we didn't really know it in the way that we know now.

And so we didn't feel that the qualitative research that we had already conducted would have matched the quantitative research that we were about to conduct in the middle of a pandemic. We also didn't feel comfortable asking people certain, you know, questions about climate change when people were worried about living that day. Where they were going to work, because everything was shutting down. So we just didn't feel that we were going to get the results that we wanted that early on in the early days of the pandemic. So we did the qualitative research. And the reason why we did that is because we wanted to understand the messages and the best messages around climate that we were hearing in the African-American community.

We decided to release the qualitative research because we felt that it was so rich and that it adds to any quantitative data that had preceded it. Or it could also still inform any quantitative research that we planned to do in the future. I studied political communications at American University and we studied how to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research. And we believed—and I was taught and still believe—that there's such richness that you can find in qualitative research that it's often dismissed as just about messaging. But it's really important data. That we learn how people are thinking and how what shapes that thinking. And so that's why we decided to release it.

And then to go to your first question about why we decided to do this research, [it] was because African Americans are a key voting bloc in the US and that voting bloc is often taken for granted, as though it thinks the exact same way. And as an African American man who works in the climate/energy space, I know that there are as many different opinions about climate as there are Black people in this country. So why not find out how people in this country are thinking about climate and also the policies that are going to impact them? And talk about that. Give voice to the voiceless and then try to create solutions that speak to those communities as well as allow them to help set the agenda that's going to impact their lives.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Can you talk about some of the findings that emerged during your interviews and maybe what themes were consistent across communities or how opinions diverged?

**Jared DeWese**

Absolutely. There was research that came out of Yale last year that said more Black people care about climate change than white people. And I do believe that in that quantitative data. However, it's about contextualizing how... What they care about and where those priorities lie. So we found three main takeaways. The first one was that Black Americans care about climate change, but it isn't a top priority. And the groups that we talk to—and again, this was in Detroit, Philadelphia and Greensboro, North Carolina—we heard a lot more about jobs. We heard a lot about racism. We also heard a lot about the economy. When we started talking about how climate could impact each of those three immediate concerns, there was an Aha Moment for people and they were like, "Oh, yeah, that makes sense, of course. If there's climate change, or there's policies to address it, jobs are going to be different and that's going to impact our community."

There's this prevailing thought sometimes, this prevailing policy thought in the US, that a rising tide lifts all boats. I personally don't believe that. And I think that you have to create solutions specific to communities, especially communities that have been oppressed. The second take away was that no one is really talking to African-American communities about climate change. People in our group said, "Well, you know, the only time I hear about it is around election time. People do come into the community. They study us and they talk about it. But then I never hear from them again. And I never know what resulted out of those conversations." There's no sustained communication in the communities that we talked to about climate change.

And the third finding that we found was that African Americans feel like clean energy resources and jobs are out of reach. In Detroit specifically we had our group that was college educated, young Black people, mixed gender, and they were all under 30. And so you would think, "Here's a group that may know people who work in a clean energy space because these are high skilled jobs." None of them knew anyone. They knew of training programs, but they didn't know anyone in those training programs. And they hadn't even seen these programs advertised in their communities or to anyone that they knew. And this was a consistent theme in each city.

In Greensboro we've heard of someone who said, "My uncle worked in a nuclear power plant and it's completely safe." That was one person. But most people, you know, didn't know of anyone who worked in the clean energy space. And they also didn't believe that a clean energy transition was going to necessarily benefit them. When we do know that air will be cleaner, there will be jobs. But these communities didn't feel like that, which led us to believe that policymakers weren't really doing their job and communicating that to them. And neither was the larger environmental movement, which is predominately white.

When I go to a lot of climate and clean energy conferences, I'm one of very few Black people in the room. And that's a visibility problem. So if you don't see people who look like you in the jobs that are going to impact your life, why would you ever think that you could also be a part of that transition?

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And I'm just hearing so many red flags right now, which is making my skin crawl.

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And I have so many questions. But the first is: This is so common in research with marginalized groups very here of researchers or political campaigns coming in and out of the community to get something, whether it's to ask their opinion on something and then never directly share that research or to never directly partner with those communities to create that research. And I was wondering if you got a sense from the communities that you were working with of mistrust or hesitancy to engage with having their lived experience [be] documented.

**Jared DeWese**

Absolutely. I think first I have to preface by saying that we did this research in the heat of a very heated Democratic primary. But there was a distrust in both political parties for that very reason you just stated, "They come into the community and we don't ever see them again. They don't continue to talk to us about this. There are no community meetings about what can we do about this strange stench in the air." That was something that came up in Philadelphia. There was a huge fire of a chemical plant not far from where [many of] the people lived, and no one really talked to them about it. And no one talked to them about what it was going to do to their health.

Most of the time when we talked about climate, people did, unprovoked and unprobed, went back to the health impacts. They talked about asthma and they talked all about these things. But they said no one is talking to them about it specifically in that way. And they are being researched by universities and other researchers like us. And yet no one is going back into the community and saying, "This is what we learned and this is how it's impacting you. This is what we can do. This is what we can do together." So, yes, there is there is a weariness of being researched. I mean even myself, when I was growing up. I grew up in a small town in South Carolina and my community was about evenly split racially, but it's still very segregated going to church, or my family owns a funeral home. It's a Black funeral home. Everything else is very segregated, other than school. And in my church, the only time we saw white politicians was when it was time for them to get reelected. [It's] the same way in most Black communities.

I work for a centre-left federal policy think tank, and one of the first things that I said when I worked there—and we are really progressive on racial issues—one of the things I said was "I don't want us to be one of those organizations. I don't want work at an organization where we're just going into the Black community and we're not asking them how to be a part of the solution and how to set the agenda. And we're just going and grabbing things from them." And luckily, we aren't one of those organizations. But I still make sure that I hold us to task for that, as a person who was in one of those communities where people were only asking me for things and not making me a part of the solution.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And so this conversation is actually reminding me of an episode recently watched. Have you heard of a show called "I May Destroy You" by Michaela Coel?

**Jared DeWese**

Yes I love it! Obsessed. All my friends and I are obsessed with the show.

**Alyssa Favreau**

She's so good.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Love her. Bow down this queen.

**Jared DeWese**

Yes.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

There is a recent episode that I was watching where she becomes an Instagram influencer for this vegan-based company.

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And part of what she has to do is promote their brand, which, it revolves around the climate change movement. And of course, it's a vegan-based company that is run by white millennials.

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And she gets a lot of flak for this, basically talking about the hesitancy to be a part of this movement as a Black person. The skepticism to include their voices in the movement, maybe more so than the actual legitimacy of climate change. And so she got a lot of flak. And so I'm thinking, how do you think the media's coverage of predominantly white folks leading the climate change movement has impacted the way Black communities engage with this topic?

**Jared DeWese**

I'll give you a quick story. I was a teacher for a short amount of time, as a New York City teaching fellow, and I taught in the Bronx. And I remember teaching this class, a history class. And I taught them—it was largely Hispanic students and Black students—and I was teaching them how to be president, what the political process was. And so I was so proud of my lesson. I was so excited: "Oh, my God. I want to teach them. They're going to be inspired." I went through the whole...how you know how you get nominated. And I go through the whole process, right? Primary system and everything. It's nuanced and I answer questions. And I thought it was the best lesson ever taught in the history of teaching. And at the end, a young Hispanic man said to me, "Yeah, but you know, I can't be president." I was like, "Why?" "Because I'm not white." And this was like 2004, so this is before Obama.

And if you don't see yourself somewhere, why would you think it's possible, especially if you live in circumstances where other people haven't moved ahead, or graduated from the circumstance that you're in now. And so the same thing applies to every group. The same thing could be said about women in this country. We didn't have a whole lot of women doctors or women lawyers or women going to college until one or two or more women started to do those things. And they start to see themselves. The same thing in the movement, in the climate movement. It's predominantly white. And Black people may be skeptical of a movement that doesn't look like them, it doesn't reflect their priorities.

**Alyssa Favreau**

I'm interested to know if you have similar stories from the interviews that you did with Third Way. If there were perspectives that surprised you or your team, or ones that really stayed with you.

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah. You know, we asked the group "Who are the people that you trust on climate or who do you think are climate leaders?" My thesis was about the politicization of climate in American politics. And it covered 1988 to 2019. It was long and exhausting. And just from that, and having grown up in the Obama era, I see Obama as a climate leader. I know everything he did in trying to move the needle on climate. His name didn't come up for any of our groups. The names we heard were Al Gore, we heard Greta Thunberg a couple of times, and we also heard Leonardo DiCaprio. We heard, in Detroit specifically, Rashida Tlaib. And we heard, I think, LeBron James. Rashida Tlaib, LeBron James, and there may have been one other person of colour that we heard, other than the list of white names we heard. So that just tells you who people think are associated with the environmental movement and who they think are not.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And what was their perceived knowledge? Or how they perceive rather their own knowledge about the environment? Did they feel confident or did they feel that they didn't have enough information? What were those conversations like?

**Jared DeWese**

Generally, most people didn't feel like they had enough information, and that the information wasn't necessarily tailored to their lives. Climate change is a nuanced, complex topic to understand. And the best way, I think, as a communicator of this topic, is to break it down for people where they are. So if you live in a community like Philadelphia where it's warmer in the wintertime than it was 20 years ago when you were growing up. That's an entry point. Well, why do you think that is? And how does this affect your life? And so those were the conversations we had. People notice things. One woman said in Philadelphia. She lived outside of the city. She said, "My asthma is only really bad when I come into the city." So they notice things. They didn't question the science. The science was never questioned. One thing about denialism [that] was interesting was that when President Trump came up, they said, "Well, you know, how important could climate change be if he doesn't even acknowledge its existence or think it's serious enough to take care of it." It would also show how much damage the president and his administration have done on this topic. Which is another reason why November is going to be extremely important.

**Alyssa Favreau**

I want to go back to the op-ed you wrote in The Hill briefly. One of the things that really struck me is that that Harvard research that you mentioned found that even a slight increase in long term exposure to air pollutants increases your chance of dying from COVID by 15 percent. And that even during the pandemic, as recently as in April, the EPA rejected its own scientists' recommendation to restrict the pollutants that are increasing that death rate.

And you wrote, "We cannot allow the daily press of crises to blind us to the environmental disaster that Trump is abetting. And we cannot ignore the toll it's taking in this pandemic." And I'm wondering if you can expand on that statement a bit. How do we focus on the forest when the trees take up so much of our attention?

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah, that's a good question. I think what we have to do is keep talking about it and keep breaking it down to people, as to what the breakdown of these regulations are doing to their daily lives. We have to I think we have to stop communicating it in a way that is overwhelming, that makes people feel fatigued. That makes people feel that there's nothing I can do. And I think what is unique to the human experience is that most human beings want to feel like they can make a difference, that any little thing they can do will make a change. And that is true even about climate change. Whether it's simply recycling, or whether it's choosing clean energy over fossil fuels if you have that choice in your community. Whether it's acknowledging that environmental racism is real, and doing what you can to break down structural racism, any little thing you can do can help change the course that's been set before us.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

You've got incredibly rich data. What are you hoping to do with it?

**Jared DeWese**

Yeah, I mean, I want more people to be exposed to it. I want more policymakers, I want more people in leadership to be exposed to it. I want these voices to be heard. I want Black voices to be heard. I want them to be honoured. And I want them to be respected. And I want them to be brought to the table and to help set the agenda. I want to do more research on this topic and find out more of its data, both qualitative and quantitative. And one of the things that I've always wanted to do as a person in the space that I inhabit is to highlight the voices of the voiceless, the people who think that no one will listen to them. And if no one will listen to them, I'll damn well make sure they listen to me.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Do I hear a presidential campaign? Is this going to happen? Oh, my God. Are we breaking this first on Broad Science? I'd be so incredibly happy.

**Jared DeWese**

Nothing to bring to you today.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

But no, thank you so much for dedicating your expertise and your life to this. We obviously need more folks who have an understanding of these community needs and are willing to value their expertise, their lived experience.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Before we let you go. Is there anything that you wanted to add or touch on?

**Jared DeWese**

No, I think we covered it all. I'm really happy to have been on here and I think you guys are doing God's work.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Thank you.

**Jared DeWese**

I think that there has been in the US, over the last three and a half years, because of who's in the White House, there's been this lack of trust in science and this anti-intellectualism that I think is becoming more pervasive. And that is, quite frankly, very scary. And I think more outlets like yours and others the better. And hopefully that voice just gets louder and louder.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Well, thank you so much for being one of our guests that make these episodes possible.

**Jared DeWese**

No problem.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Yeah, we can only do what we do because of folks like yourself. So thank you so much Jared.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Thank you so much to Jerry DeWese for talking to us this week. You can find him on Twitter @JaredDeWese. And there's also @ThirdWayEnergy that you can follow.

**Alyssa Favreau**

If you'd like to learn more about Third Way and the work they do, you can visit thirdway.org, which will be linked in our show notes, along with a study we discussed, Jared's op-ed, and a few additional resources.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

We are on Twitter as well @science\_broads. You can also find us at broadscience.org and anywhere podcasts can be listened to: iTunes, SoundCloud, Spotify, Stitcher.

**Alyssa Favreau**

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**Rackeb Tesfaye**

This episode was edited and mixed by the wonderful Ryan MacFarlane. Thank you so much, Ryan. In partnership with CKUT 90.3 FM, as always.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Please take care of yourselves and each other and we'll see you next week.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And friends, please wear your masks, please.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Yes, please. Please, please.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

We're cutting her off. We're cutting her off.