

Harlem Heat Project

Climate Communications Case Story



Accessibility



Personalization



Social Norms and Prompts



Visual Storytelling

PROJECT AT-A-GLANCE

Project Title: Harlem Heat Project

Location: Harlem, New York City

Project Partners: Residents of Harlem, WNYC, AdaptNY, ISeeChange, WE ACT for Environmental Justice

Date: Launched in 2016

Climate Issue: Extreme heat and its disproportionate impact on urban communities

Action Area: Climate justice and equity, climate change awareness and citizen science

Behavioural Theme(s): Accessibility, Personalization, Social Norms and Prompts, Visual Storytelling

Audience: Harlem residents, municipal decision-makers



Stories and data are two sides of the same coin, and we need both to guide adaptation decisions.

— Julia Kumari Drapkin, iSeeChange Founder¹⁷

¹⁷ I See Change. (2016, July). Harlem Heat investigation launches with #ISeeChange as partner. <https://stories.iseechange.org/harlem-heat-investigation-launches-with-iseechange-as-partner/>

IMPACT STORY

The Harlem Heat Project documented and raised awareness about the severe impacts of extreme heat on Harlem's residents. This project employed a multifaceted approach, blending data collection, community engagement, and multimedia storytelling methods to highlight the critical issue of extreme heat in urban areas through a blog and podcast series.

One episode of the podcast, the "The Harlem Heat Song", innovatively captured personal experiences of heat in the community by translating temperature data into sounds. To gather the heat data, residents were equipped with heat sensors (via the ISeeChange phone application) to collect real-time information on indoor temperatures during heatwaves, providing a detailed picture of how heat affects daily life. Data points were then turned into musical notes to sonically convey the temperatures captured indoors as compared to outdoors. Demonstrating innovation both in its data collection methods and in its sonic storytelling, the Harlem Heat Song creatively captured and conveyed the community's experiences, serving both as an awareness tool and a call to action.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES INCLUDE...

- Capturing the real-life experiences of Harlem residents during heatwaves to offer both qualitative and quantitative insights into how extreme heat affects daily life in urban communities;
- Equipping Harlem residents with the knowledge, tools, and data (via heat sensors) to understand heat risks and apply effective heat mitigation strategies in their homes; and,
- Utilizing personal stories to help a wider audience empathize with the lived experiences of vulnerable communities.

COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- **Podcast and Audio Recordings:** In collaboration with local news stations, WNYC and WHCR, a podcast series featured interviews and personal stories to raise awareness about heat impacts and how to deal with them.
- **Crowd-Sourcing and Citizen Science:** The Harlem Heat Project used crowd-sourcing to collect personal stories, observations, and data from Harlem residents about extreme heat. This approach highlighted community experiences, providing a fuller picture of real heat impacts across different neighbourhoods. Residents received heat sensors to monitor temperatures and the gathered data was analyzed to understand the extent of heat impact.
- **Community Workshops:** Events were held to discuss findings and share heat mitigation strategies with impacted residents.
- **Social Media Campaigns:** The community was engaged online with updates, tips, and personal stories.

BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES & TAKEAWAYS

- **Accessibility:** Audio recordings of stories were shared on WNYC helped to reach a broad audience.
- **Visual Storytelling:** A variety of innovative storytelling methods were employed ranging from audio, text, and video to humanize the data in a variety of accessible mediums. In particular, visual and sonic representations of data as well as videos were used to illustrate the impacts of extreme heat.
- **Personalization:** Communications used personal stories and data collected by community members to make the issue of extreme heat more relevant and poignant to community members and listeners within the target audience.
- **Social Norms and Prompts:** The participation of Harlem residents and their contributions to the project fostered a sense of collective action and comradery. By showcasing community involvement, the project reinforced the idea that addressing extreme heat was a shared responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The Harlem Heat Project is a powerful example of how data-driven storytelling can raise awareness and drive action on climate issues. The project's success demonstrates that blending data with compelling stories and local collaboration can effectively highlight the need for urban climate resilience and empower the community to advocate for better living conditions.

SOURCES

Gonzalez, S., & Palazzolo, A. (2016, September 29). *Hear the heat: Our song demonstrates what it felt like inside Harlem homes this summer* [Radio broadcast]. WNYC News. <https://www.wnyc.org/story/harlem-heat-song/>

WNYC. (2016). *Harlem Heat Project* [Radio series]. <https://www.wnyc.org/series/harlem-heat-project>

MORE CASE STORIES AND RESOURCES ONLINE

This case story was developed by ICLEI Canada through the Ontario Resource Centre for Climate Adaptation (ORCCA) as part of a Climate Communications Toolkit. Find more case stories and additional climate communications resources online at icleicanada.org/project/climate-communications-toolkit

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CLIMATE COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

