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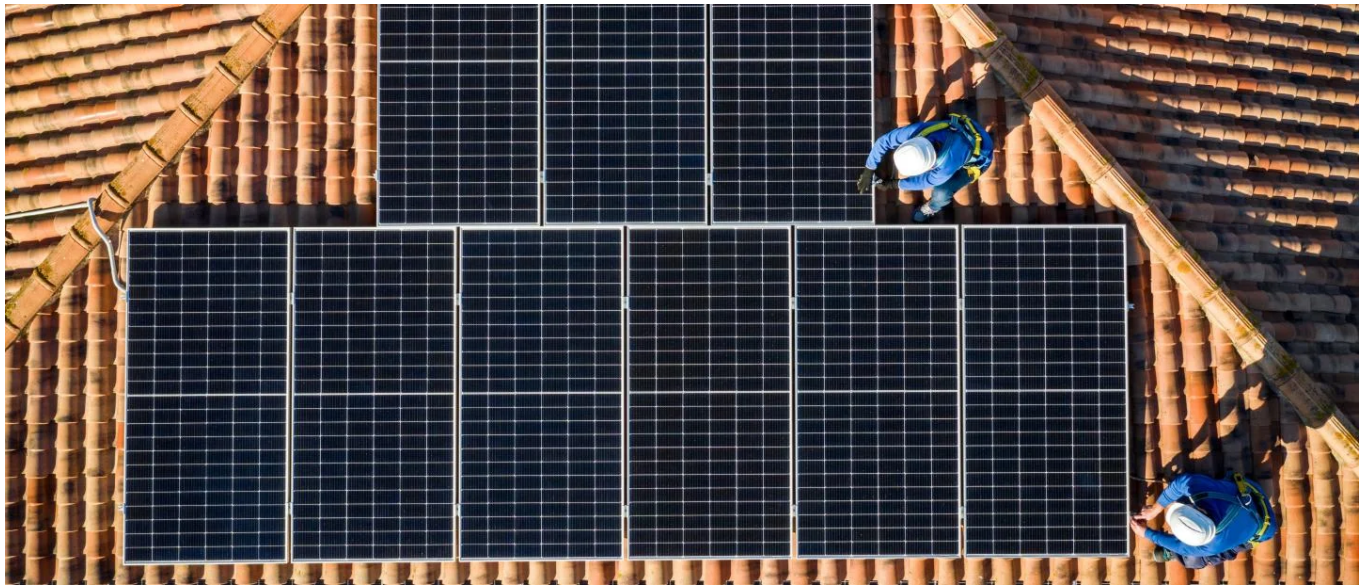
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Observability, the ability to see the behaviors of others could increase the adaptation of climate-friendly behavior.

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Harnessing the Power of Observability May Increase Climate-Friendly Behavior

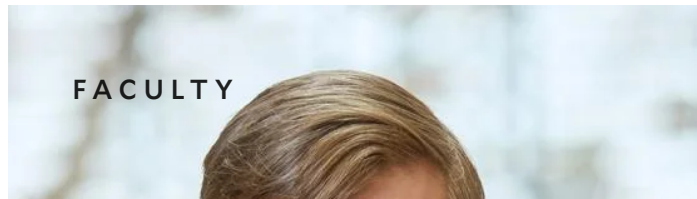
A team of researchers has found that providing information to others about personal efforts to promote sustainability could increase the adoption of pro-environmental behavior.

Drive through a residential neighborhood, and if you spot one home with solar panels, chances are you will find at least one or two more. Observability, the ability to see the behaviors of others, has been known for decades as an essential driver of human actions. It is particularly important in the adoption of green behaviors and technologies and could lead later adopters to follow early adopters more quickly. [Studies](#) show, for instance, that solar panels installed on one roof increases the odds that neighbors will install their own panels.

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A team of

researchers,
including Kenneth
Gillingham,
professor of
environmental and
energy economics
at the Yale School of
the Environment,
has found that
being able to
provide information
to others about
their green behavior
could increase the
adoption of an
invisible form of
pro-environmental behavior.



Kenneth Gillingham →

"The big takeaway is that when people believe that they can share information about their green decisions, this increases their proclivity to make green decisions," Gillingham said.

The research team examined the influence of observability in the context of peer-to-peer solar. Peer-to-peer solar offers an opportunity for households that cannot have solar panels installed on their homes to access solar energy from their neighbors. It works like this: one household with rooftop solar sells electricity to the grid to cover the electricity

consumed by another household, usually a close neighbor. It enables renters or homeowners who have rooftops that are not suitable for solar, or who may be too financially constrained to install solar, to purchase renewable electricity. This model, however, often requires the household with the solar panels to put in a larger solar installation than they would have otherwise done in order to be able to sell their excess energy generation to cover the electricity of the neighbor.

“An exciting aspect of our study is that we have a context where people can make a pro-environmental decision by signing up for peer-to-peer solar when their rooftop is not suitable for their own solar system, and that decision is inherently not visible or observable to others. This allows us an opportunity to make a key decision observable, and thus test the importance of observability,” Gillingham said.

“ When people believe that they can share information about their green decisions, this increases their proclivity to make green decisions.”

Kenneth Gillingham Professor of Environmental and Energy Economics

The researchers implemented a set of randomized Facebook campaign ads in the Massachusetts cities of Cambridge and Somerville to study social media users' interest in peer-to-peer solar through clicks on the ads. They conducted the study over a two-year period between 2018 to 2020 in partnership with the peer-to-peer company MySunBuddy. The research was part of a Department of Energy funded [SEEDS2-SES](#) project and [coordinated with the Yale Center for Business and the Environment](#).

In the campaigns, customers were informed that they could share "green reports" online, providing information to others about their greenness. They found that interest in peer-to-peer solar increased by up to 30% when "green reports," which would make otherwise invisible

NEWSLETTER

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behavior visible, were mentioned in the ads, according to the results published in the [Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization](#).

The study found that people care about the ability to share their prosocial behavior with their online social networks and that online visibility can serve as a substitute for physical visibility when the latter is not an option.

While thousands saw the ads, Gillingham said the study would need to be replicated in other settings to understand how effective making the invisible green behavior visible to others could be in increasing sustainable behaviors.

"This could be leveraged by policymakers or other stakeholders looking for ways to encourage green decisions by allowing people ways to make their decisions more observable to others," Gillingham said.

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