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Why We Need to Change How We Talk About Climate Change

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The scientific community has reached a resounding consensus on climate change -- 97 percent of scientists worldwide agree that the climate is warming, and that these warming trends have been caused by human activities. Yet, despite this overwhelming consensus, just over half of Americans (57 percent) believe that global warming is caused by humans, and this number is lower than it was almost a decade ago in 2007 (at 61 percent). What is most surprising, however, is the fact that only 42 percent of Americans believe that "most scientists think global warming is happening," while a full third of Americans believe that "there is a lot of disagreement among scientists." It is evident that there has been a divergence between the scientific consensus and public beliefs on climate change, fostered by the perception of disagreement within the scientific community on the issue.

Climate change has become an increasingly polarized issue; among the slim majority of Americans whom believe that climate change is human-caused, 79 percent are Democrats, while only 41 percent are Republican. There are many within the Republican Party -- politicians and entrenched special interests alike -- that steadfastly oppose climate change policy, and claim that the global warming trends over the past century are instead due to natural variations in the Earth's environment. The views of these so-called "climate contrarians" or skeptics have been deceptively presented to the American public as the legitimate views of climate-change experts and scientists, a deception which has built the perception among the public that scientists cannot agree on the climate change and its causes. Yet, the simple fact is that the vast majority of scientists do agree. The less the public believes that scientists can agree on the causes of climate change, the less likely the public is to believe in anthropogenic (or human-caused) climate change. After all, if the scientists that dedicate their lives towards studying the climate can't agree on climate change, how can the public be expected to believe in it?

The misunderstanding, if you will, that scientists do not agree on climate change has been one of the primary forces driving the divergence between scientific consensus and public beliefs.

Undoubtedly, the mass media have had a large part to play in perpetuating this misunderstanding. Political affiliations aside, the television networks that a majority of Americans turn to as their primary source of news -- CNN, FOX, MSNBC, ABC, NBC -- have all perpetuated this myth that the scientific community does not agree on climate change. The journalistic norm of balance is largely to blame; balanced reporting aims for neutrality, and requires that the views of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute are both provided with equal attention and weight. For an issue such as climate change, however, balanced reporting has led to informationally biased coverage, and has allowed a small group of skeptics to have their views amplified disproportionately to the skeptical view within scientific discourse.

Indeed, it has become commonplace on television networks to present climate change as a debate, with one person arguing for climate change (usually Bill Nye the Science Guy) and one person arguing against. However, as John Oliver has correctly pointed out, this debate format is inherently flawed. Presenting a 50/50 debate format with equal weight given to both sides make it seem as if the skeptical position is equally as valid as the consensus position. While John Oliver's cheeky rendition of a "Statistically Representative Climate Change Debate" -- a debate between Bill Nye plus 96 other scientists and three climate change deniers -- may be the most accurate representation of the scientific discourse on climate change, TV networks need not go to that extreme in order to avoid deceiving the public on the issue. However, a few steps should be made in order to present climate change within the mass media in an informationally unbiased (or "statistically representative") way.

First, the journalistic norm of balance must be considered within the context of the scientific discourse on climate change. While ignoring the journalistic norm of balance within the mass media may seem counterintuitive towards presenting climate change in an unbiased way, it is necessary to correctly present climate change as the consensus that it is within the scientific community. As well, clarifying the scientific training or relevant funding sources of "experts" would be a necessary step in the right direction. Too often scientists are pitted against so-called "expert" skeptics that work for conservative think-tanks and foundations, effectively elevating the views of those 'experts' to the level of scientific discourse when in fact they have little scientific background at all. Moreover, many of these conservative foundations and think-tanks - such as the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and the Koch-founded Americans For Prosperity -- have direct ties with the fossil fuel industry, and undoubtedly have ulterior motives in perpetuating the myth of skepticism.

The myth of skepticism within the scientific community is but one of the many factors that inform public beliefs on climate change. However, this perpetuated myth of debate has been instrumental in creating both discursive and real political space for the U.S. government to shirk responsibility and delay action on global warming. Presenting climate change and its causes as the consensus that it is, and not the debate that it has become, would both inform public beliefs on climate change, and force politicians to act. Admittedly, it is an uphill battle; partisanship and entrenched special interests have made the implementation of climate policy an increasingly

infeasible political objective. And yet, presenting climate change and its causes as the consensus that it is and not a debate on television would accurately inform the public on climate change, and it would help build the political momentum necessary to enact climate policy.